

# Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society



*Volume 4, Issue 4*

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





---

## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Editorial Statement</b>   | 553 |
| <b>Editor's Introduction</b><br><i>Michael Joseph</i>  | 555 |
| <b>Versions of Robert Graves</b><br><i>Dunstan Ward</i>  | 562 |
| <b>Straddling the Fence</b><br><i>Alicja Bemben</i>  | 583 |
| <b>Missing Believed Killed? Graves and Contemporary Poetry</b><br><i>Sean O'Brien</i>  | 597 |
| <b>Further into the Labyrinth: Letters between Robert Graves and Basil Liddell-Hart in the 1930s</b><br><i>Joseph Bailey</i> | 615 |
| <b>'If "Princess Europa" returned to her namesake today': Robert Graves and Europa</b><br><i>Nancy Rosenfeld</i>             | 627 |
| <b>Visioning the Impossible</b><br><i>Nick Carter</i>  | 639 |
| <b>The Archetype of the White Goddess in Robert Graves, Maja Herman Sekulić, and Ted Hughes</b><br><i>Tanja Cvetković</i>    | 653 |
| <b>Poet in the Nursery</b><br><i>Michael Joseph</i>  | 659 |

---

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>Poems</b>                                | 707 |
| <i>Rachel Hadas, JonArno Lawson</i>         |     |
| <b>Deyá's Early Days</b>                    | 715 |
| <i>Miriam Frank</i>                         |     |
| <b>Cecil James Sidney Woolf (1927-2019)</b> | 750 |
| <i>Jean Moorcroft Wilson</i>                |     |
| <b>Call for Papers</b>                      | 759 |
| <i>Editor</i>                               |     |





*Gravesiana: The Journal  
of the Robert Graves Society*

Volume 4, Issue 4 (Summer 2020)



## **Editorial Statement**

*Gravesiana* is a peer-reviewed journal that publishes scholarly articles concerning Robert Graves and topics of related interest such as early twentieth century British poetry, World War I and its ongoing influence on contemporary history and culture, early modernist literature, mythology, historical fiction, and twentieth century feminisms. 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 that aim to highlight Graves's personal relationship with various literary and other contemporaries, as well as providing personal glimpses of the person behind the poetry, fiction, mythography, scholarship and criticism.

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

*Gravesiana* is available as an electronic journal (at [www.robertgraves.org/gravesiana](http://www.robertgraves.org/gravesiana)) 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.



## Crisis

Michael Joseph

The bi-annual conference of the Society was cancelled this September due to travel restrictions imposed by the respiratory virus pandemic COVID-19 (CoronaVirus Disease-2019). It had been our hope that *Gravesiana* would contribute to the buffet of intellectual and sensual pleasures provided by our President, Charles Mundye, and Honorary President, William Graves, and our conference planners, but now we hope it will serve as a partial distraction if not a consolation for their absence.

We could call this issue the pandemic issue, and, although it wasn't planned as such, we could point out that many of our articles either have a crisis at their core or describe events triggered by crisis, probably unsurprising given that they are mostly focused on the life and career of a poet: one who recalled the Irish apothegm, '*It is death to mock a poet. It is death to love a poet. It is death to be a poet*'.

However, since life must not always be contemplated head in hands, we begin the issue with a crisis-free offering by Dunstan Ward, who generously shares his experiences editing and compiling the magisterial three volume *Complete Poems* he produced with Beryl Graves and published (1995-1999) with Carcanet Press. In 'Versions of Robert Graves', he discusses, among other things, the inspiration for his prodigious task, his editorial methodology, informed by his association with the late Robert Bertholf, the Charles D. Abbott Scholar-In-Residence and former curator of The Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo, his rationale for privileging final drafts over first, his working relationship with Beryl Graves, and the reception of his volumes. He also reflects on spending his university vacations in Deyá, and provides vivid, poetic descriptions drawn from his contemporary diary of moments preserved from employment:

We worked steadily all day; one long humid summer I took only four days off. 'You *must* go out,' Beryl would say to me towards the end of the afternoon, and I'd go for a walk above the cliffs and, in warm weather, swim off the rocks. During the summer Lucia used to drive Beryl and me down to the Cala for a morning bathe. Beryl did the cooking, on a venerable Aga supplemented by a stove outside the kitchen door. She had a repertoire of tasty dishes, including an exemplary gazpacho. On fine nights we dined out on the terrace, maybe in the company of visiting family or friends. From time to time we would eat in the village or at one of the two fish restaurants down at the Cala, or, on special occasions, at an excellent cliff-top restaurant, Bens d'Avall, off the road north to Soller. In the evenings we played countless games of Scrabble.

Following 'Versions of Robert Graves', Alicja Bembien presents the first of our crisis essays, 'Straddling the Fence', a virtuoso analysis of the Claudius novels drawing on the historiographical methodology of the American historian, Hayden White. She examines Claudius's contrasting representations of history, beginning with ontological assumptions that would undoubtedly have been familiar to Graves's ancestor, Leopold Van Ranke:

'The real to which Graves introduces his hero is constructed as if it were logical, coherent, and well-organised, and that what precludes Claudius from understanding the workings of the world are deficiencies in his knowledge and/or interpretation of his milieu'. However, once Claudius is better informed by betrayal, nymphomania, greed, vaunting ambition, sociopathy and other similar human qualities and tendencies, he is forced to conclude that 'reality is not as ordered or organisable as he has supposed, that it is formed of people's rational but also irrational needs and/or impulses'.

Professor Bembien postulates that Claudius's intellectual evolution from teleology, the Victorian idea of history as a 'grand

narrative [. . . a] story with a central plot in which individuals take their place', to contingency, the Modernist preference for complexity and disorderliness is precipitated by Graves's ontological crisis, and argues that his solution is finally to 'straddle the fence': to position himself, uncomfortably, against and within both Victorian and Modernist views of the past.

In 'Missing, Believed Dead: Graves and Contemporary Poetry' the poet Sean O'Brien delivers a remarkable appreciation of Graves's poetics which concentrates on three of his interests: 'crossings between the worlds of the living and the dead', 'formal tension' in some poems, and love poems. O'Brien's essay shows a concern for what Graves's oeuvre has to offer (it is considerable) to younger poets, and for Graves's proper place in the critically important transmission and tradition of poetry, as well as how those currents touch on the 'general esteem' with which poetry is held. O'Brien isn't manifestly troubled by crisis, but the question of crossing from the world of the living to the world of the dead, which begins his essay and occupies a lot of his attention, may be the wellspring from which all crises arise.

Joseph Bailey's 'Further into the Labyrinth' performs a close reading of the correspondence between Graves and the military historian, Basil Liddell-Hart, with whom he co-authored *Lawrence to His Biographer* (1938). Bailey's deft depiction of Graves as he feuds with the Lawrence committee and the Maccus-like Raymond Savage, while coming to terms with a co-author of a very different temperament, adds useful detail to an interesting chapter in Graves's biography, and modelling to his relationship with Laura Riding. Bailey follows Graves's correspondence to its conclusion, occurring as he is in flight from Deyá at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Bailey promises us a minotaur at the beginning of his essay, and he delivers one.

Nick Carter and Nancy Rosenfeld directly address the theme of the 2018 conference whence many of these essays first emerged, 'Robert Graves and Europe: *Good-bye to All That / But it Still Goes On*'. In 'If "Princess Europa" Returned to Her Namesake

Today', Rosenfeld concatenates Graves's published references to 'Europa' in two central works, *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess*, 'as possible sites of Gravesian insights into the geographical-historical Europe'. She then treats in passing two of his poems, 'Secret Land', an imaginary plot that hovers above Graves's geophysical concerns, and 'General Bloodstock's Lament for England', an ostensible parody betraying wistful traces of Graves's nostalgic vision of a lost ideal. Just as Bailey's article concludes on a minor chord with rumblings of war and exile, Rosenfeld's ends with that poem's implicit rape.

Rosenfeld's ominous insights into the *On-goingness* of cultural trauma darkens further in Nick Carter's essay, 'Visioning the Impossible'. If Rosenfeld provides the backward gazing profile of the Janus head, Carter would be the forward gazing one, although he begins by glancing backward. 'Visioning the Impossible' first assembles literary exhibits and authorities, both high – Yeats, Hardy, Eliot, Tennyson – and, arguably, low – Emile Sercombe, George Monbriot, Bob Dylan – to establish the occurrence and legitimacy of concern for the fate of civilization in modern letters. Asking then, in a tone meant surely to evoke Graves, 'Where, then, is Graves in all this?', he attempts to affirm that Graves was deeply invested in both the *It of But It Still Goes On* and the *whither*: civilization and its progressively concerning fate.

Carter reminds us that Graves defines civilization drolly in *The White Goddess* as 'the graceful relation of all varieties of experience to a central humane system of thought' in a part of the essay productively overlapping with Alicja Bemben's contentions about Graves's hybrid metaphysics in 'Straddling the Fence', before it segues into a comparative study of Claudio Magris. Magris, Carter says, is a 'one time Professor of Modern and Contemporary German Literature at the University of Trieste, novelist, essayist, public lecturer, erstwhile senator of the Italian Republic, Erasmus prize-winner, but above all inhabitant of the melting pot of Central Europe – Trieste'. Characteristically ironic and hopeful, Carter concludes by flipping the premise: the

question isn't, what can civilization do for art, but what can art as a form of truth do for civilization. If the solution to civilization's existential crisis is impossible to see, art 'visions the impossible'.

Civilization under threat is the implicit concern of 'The Archetype of The White Goddess in Robert Graves, Maja Herman Sukulić, and Ted Hughes' by Tanja Cvetković, bringing us back to the touchstone if not the epicentre of Graves studies. Professor Cvetković draws new comparisons between Graves and Ted Hughes, with reference to his volume, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). She also introduces us to the contemporary Serbian poet Maja Herman Sekulić (nb. currently quarantined in New York), exploring Gravesian affinities in her poems about the Lady of Vinča, whom she describes as 'the very first poet, proto poet, proto artist', celebrated by the inhabitants of the Vinča culture in 5700-4500 BC.

The Lady of Vinča is the famous Neolithic figurine with triangular or pentagonal face, the protruding angular cheekbones, dreamy half-closed eyes, usually with her arms bended over her heart. She was the symbol of the rule of the female principle in Europe, but also the symbol of the first alphabet and messages inscribed in the Vinča script, the first proto letters still unknown to science.

As a generative symbol of civilization, The Lady of Vinča represents for Herman Sekulić 'those values of humanity [...] which have been destroyed by the patriarchy'.

Nobody will need reminding that during the pandemic of 1918, while stationed in Limerick, Graves contracted the flu that would ultimately infect 500 million people, and kill one in ten. Despite suffering PTSD and general war-weariness, he recognized its early symptoms and 'decided to make a run for it'. That way, he explained, 'I should at least have my influenza in an English, and not an Irish, hospital.'

Respiratory illness was no stranger. At the age of three, he had been quarantined with the deadly whooping cough along with his older sisters, Clarissa and Rosaleen. It was at the Red Branch Cottage in Wimbledon, under lockdown, that he wrote his first poems. In my article, 'Poet in the Nursery', purloining the title of an early canonical poem, I explore the highly precocious nursery verse, 'Who Did That', point out uncanny affinities with mature work, and speculate on its probable method of composition 'Poet in the Nursery' also revisits poems Graves wrote in his twenties, proposing that Graves's well-known post-war sensitivity was

conditioned by or induced by shellshock: but not determined by it. What we see in the post-war, shellshocked Graves had its roots in a condition implicated in a mode of consciousness that Graves associated [...] with poetry.

Four offerings fill out the second part of *Gravesiana*, beginning with poems by the American poet Rachel Hadas (whose father, Moses Hadas, the classical scholar, was a correspondent of Graves's), and JonArno Lawson, a Canadian poet with an international following. Hadas has published numerous books of poetry and essays. Her honours include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Ingram Merrill Foundation Grants, the O.B. Hardison Award from the Folger Shakespeare Library, and an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Her poems regularly appear in *The New Yorker*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and in *PN*. Lawson has published numerous books of poetry and essays. He is a four-time winner of The Lion and The Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry, among other honours.

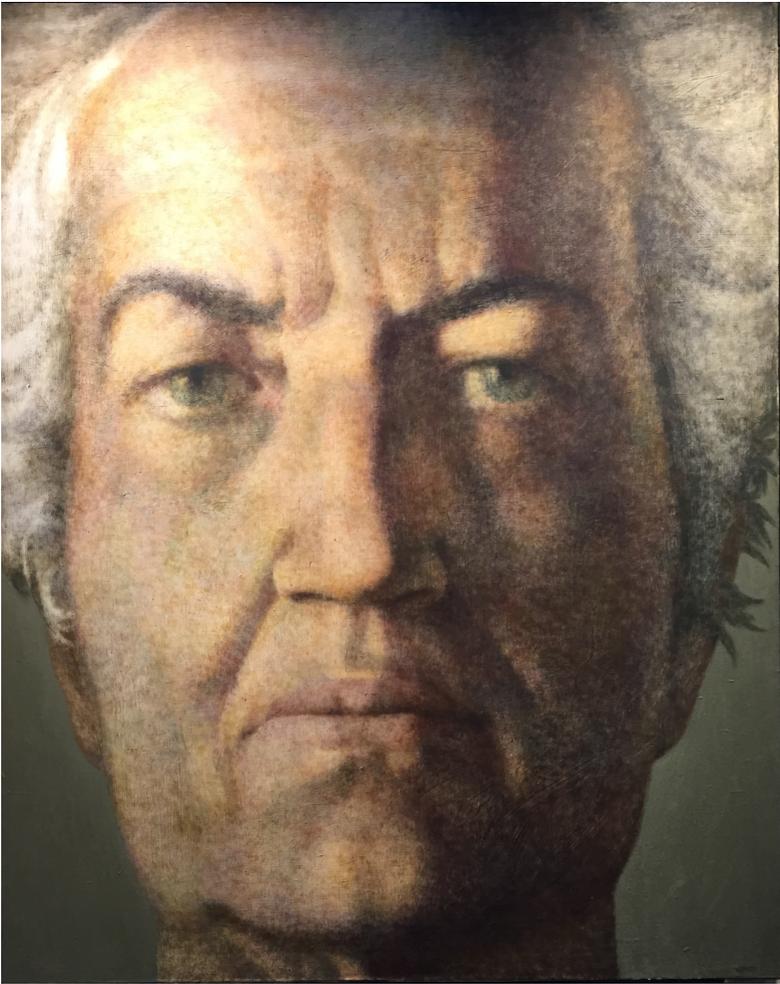
Concluding our issue of *Gravesiana* are two biographical pieces. The first is an album of photographs taken mostly in Deyá in the same period Graves and Riding were first settling there by a German Jewish photographer who fled Nazi Germany. The

original photographs are in the collection of the author, Miriam Frank, who, in an effort to adhere to our ad hoc theme, arranged to be born in Barcelona the year the Spanish Civil War broke out, and who, in addition to these fascinating photographs, provides an eloquent introduction. While, regrettably, there are no new likenesses of Graves and Riding, places and houses they frequented are depicted, including a house that may have been the one they rented when they first arrived in Deyá. There are also portraits of some of the colourful figures who visited and settled in Deyá, including the German painter Ulrich Leman, his companion Joseph Fontdevilla, Seppl Campalans and her husband, the notorious Hubert von Ranke, Graves's German cousin, a onetime communist recruiter and French spy.

I would like to thank Lucia Graves and William for their help in identifying people and places in these photographs. They have enriched the clarity and scholarly usefulness of this album. Notwithstanding that, there are people neither they nor Miriam Frank could recognize. It is our hope that crowd-sourcing might fill in gaps: so, friends, if you can identify one of these figures, e.g. 'Man with army belt and hat', 'Man with small goat', please contact us, and you will be appropriately embraced in the next issue of *Gravesiana*.

The second biographical piece is a memorial by Jean Moorcroft Wilson to our friend and colleague Cecil Woolf, who passed away on 10 June, at the age of ninety-two, after a busy and productive life as scholar, biographer, and of course publisher. Cecil's wit and charm will be dearly missed by all of us.

Finally, stay safe; stay sane. We look forward to seeing you next year.



John Ulbricht, Portrait of Robert Graves (1968) *Image courtesy the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York.*

## Versions of Robert Graves

*Dunstan Ward*

I first encountered poems by Robert Graves in Kenneth Allott's 1950 *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, like Michael Longley, who quotes Allott in the introduction to his Faber selected Graves: 'The poetry of Robert Graves is in some ways the purest poetry produced in our time'.<sup>1</sup>

I was seventeen, in my last year at school in New Zealand, when I read this assessment. Allott also predicts: 'The bibliography of his poems is sure to provide headaches for future scholars' (p. 109). My own headaches, both physical and figurative, started thirty years later, when Beryl Graves and I began work on what eventually became the three-volume Carcanet edition of the *Complete Poems*, and the Penguin Classics edition.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes I almost wished we'd heeded the warning in one of the poems chosen by Allott, 'Children, leave the string alone!', and not opened those 'neat brown paper parcels' of first editions in the chest in Graves's study at Deyá . . . The Allott text, though, still reads as in *Poems 1929*: 'leave the string untied'. The contradiction was finally detected by Graves's assistant Karl Goldschmidt, and the line emended in *Collected Poems 1959*: this was to be duly recorded in a note in *Complete Poems*, Volume II. In 'The Thieves' Allott has silently corrected another mistake, 'meum-teum' instead of 'meum-tuum'. This time it was his poet friend James Reeves who pointed it out to Graves in a letter in 1959, as, again, a note in Volume II records.<sup>3</sup>

From the Allott selection I went on to further poems by Graves in the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, and then to Graves's own Penguin selection, in the revised and enlarged edition of 1966. My copy is dated 1968, the first year of my academic career. I was reading it in the Waikato University library when Vincent O'Sullivan, today one of New Zealand's most celebrated writers,

paused at my table: ‘Ah, I see you’re a Robert Graves man. We must talk’ – and we’ve been talking about Graves ever since.

I pursued my interest in Graves’s poetry after I moved in 1971 to London, and then in 1973 to Paris. Settling into a new apartment in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, I pinned above my desk a pensive photo of the poet in his familiar black hat.



I made my first visit to Mallorca in July 1989. It was, in a sense, a pilgrimage. I wanted to see the village of Deyá where he had lived, the Mediterranean scenery he evokes in his poetry. A mutual friend put me in touch with Graves’s youngest son, Tomás, who told me that a neighbour, Robert Edwards, might have a room available.

Edwards was a retired English civil servant; he had known Graves during the last, declining years of his life. I met him on 9 July at a bar in Deyá; in my diary I noted: ‘70s, white spade beard, short, pot, watchful amiability.’ We reached his house via a long twisting stepped path down a terraced hillside. ‘A simple strong-lined stone farmhouse, the form typical of those on the hills around, Roman tiles, green shutters, flagged floors.’ Its name was C’an Pa Bo, ‘the house of good bread’.

Edwards told me that Graves and Laura Riding had lived in C’an Pa Bo while their own house, Canellun, was being built. The upstairs room I chose had in fact been Graves’s; I would even be sleeping in the same bed. From the jasmine-framed window, which gave a splendid prospect of the mountains enclosing Deyá, I could see Casa Salerosa, where Graves and Riding installed themselves in 1929, sixty years before.

About 6.30 next morning I walked up to the church crowning the hill above the village. From the cemetery there was

a beautiful view of sea, beyond a long terraced valley, the sun not over the hilltops yet, though the sea already

glowing. Found Robert Graves's tomb, after searching in vain for a bust or monument. Instead there's just a flat cement slab, slightly thicker at the top end and therefore slanting, with the inscription scratched with a stick, apparently, while the cement was still wet: 'Robert Graves / Poeta / 24.7.1895 –7.12.1985' (the '24' evidently a correction after an initial mistake), written in a laboured, ingenuous longhand. There were some scraggy little bushes planted round the edges, and a bunch of carnations, now dead, wrapped in plastic and thrust into the neck of a jar. The stone is at a slight angle to the others in the graveyard; at its head there is a fine tall cypress. [...] I knelt at the graveside and said a prayer.

In coming to Mallorca, I had no intention of intruding on the Graves family. I hoped at best to be able to see his house from the road, as my mother had some years before, catching a glimpse from the coach windows of the poet in his garden. However, a week after I arrived, I wanted to check some allusions in the poems I was reading and asked Edwards if he had a copy of *The White Goddess*. He didn't, but suggested that I might be able to borrow one from Mrs Graves. We called in next morning on the way to Soller to do the shopping. As we went up the path through the garden she came to greet us, accompanied excitedly by her shaggy black-and-white dog, Sharik.<sup>4</sup> I describe Beryl in my diary as 'a shortish, strong-faced, slightly stooping woman with cropped straight grey hair, in a faded blue and white striped dress and sandals'. When I was back in Deyá in April the following year, I wrote: 'Beryl absolutely as I'd recalled her, stooped, the strong straight mouth and firm jaw, steady blue eyes, appraising, her smile lighting up her at times grim face, her sense of fun, the real relish in her laughter.' She was to become a central figure in my life, a kind and understanding friend, yet always a little daunting in her reserve, her silent perceptiveness.

---

I was impressed by Canellun: ‘It’s a big house, two storeyed, [...] stone, of course, a fine large garden with terraces, and seats and tables at various points, lots of trees and shrubs. Good pictures, ceramics, etc. inside, plain furniture.’ The copy of *The White Goddess* that she lent me was Graves’s. We were talking of him when Natalia Farran came through, the young girl with long dark hair I’d sighted lying on the rocks and chatted with during a swim along the coastline. She turned out to be Beryl’s granddaughter, and she was preparing material for a reading devoted to Graves’s ‘Last Poems’, work he hadn’t published in book form before his death. My diary continues:

Natalia went back to her work and Beryl clearly wanted to resume hers, so she and Robert Edwards started moving out, but fearing to miss the opportunity more than the risk of seeming ‘pushy’, I asked if I could see Graves’s study. She was quite willing, though it had to be quick. She took me through the house to a shaded, cool room at the back. A big wooden desk with space to sit at either side [...]. Lots of small objects, including statuettes, on the mantelpiece [...]. Many more objects around the room which I longed to inspect but hadn’t the time to even register before she ushered me out again. She joked about what Graves’s reaction would have been to the word-processor on his desk; a poem had been partly printed out. In the garden Robert Edwards and she spoke of the reading, rather nice hand-painted posters for which Natalia had shown us. Then we said good-bye to her at the gate, and we headed off to Soller [...], *The White Goddess* under my arm.

The poetry reading and concert took place on Sunday the 23rd, the eve of Graves’s birthday, maintaining a tradition established during his lifetime – he would often write a play for the occasion and act in it himself. With my brother Reg, who had just come over from Madrid, Edwards and I met Beryl on her way down to

the small open-air amphitheatre in the field opposite the house. The poems were read by members and friends of the family. I was sitting next to Beryl and asked her about the texts. She said the originals were up at the house: would I care to look at them?

On the 24th there were fresh flowers on Graves's tomb. Two days later, on the Wednesday, I went to Canellun with Reg (when I asked Beryl if I could bring him, she answered, after a moment, 'I think that would be in order'). She led us through to what she called the Press Room, where Graves, Riding and Len Lye produced their remarkable Seizin Press editions, and where Graves died, as I learnt later from Natalia. Beryl showed us manuscripts and typescripts of the poems we had been listening to. It was an unforgettable experience to see and to hold, for the first time, a sheet of paper with a poem on it in Robert Graves's handwriting.

We went back again on the Friday, my last day in Mallorca. Beryl was seated in the Press Room at the heavy wooden table, which was scattered with manuscripts of poems that she was in the process of sorting. What with the heat, and the children and visitors, she said it was difficult to make any progress. While she was out of the room getting us some lemonade, I said to my brother that she obviously had too much to do. 'I'd love to offer to give her hand.' 'Then why don't you?' 'There are other people who would be better qualified to do it.' 'Are there? Who?' 'Well, Vincent, for example.' 'Perhaps, but he isn't here, and you are.' So, when she returned I asked her if perhaps I could come back in a month's time and help. She was happy with the idea. A little later Lucia appeared at the door. 'Darling, this is Dunstan,' Beryl told her. 'He's going to help me with the manuscripts.' Lucia looked at her and raised her eyebrows; her mother nodded firmly, and Lucia smiled.

On 5 August Beryl wrote to me in Paris about obtaining copies of poems printed only in magazines. Her letter ends, 'I can't tell you how relieved I am that you are coming back in September.'

Over the next eight months I underwent what I realised in retrospect was an ideal intensive training course in editing Robert Graves's poems. Among the manuscripts at Canellun were the drafts of dozens of unpublished poems, and many more unfinished poems and fragments. For each of these poems, I went carefully through the drafts, often numerous, and put them in order, by tracing successive revisions. In so doing I was able to study the process of Graves's composition from within, to examine how his changes improved the poem, strengthening its inner logic, bringing out latent content, sharpening imagery, and tightening rhythm. I learnt the characteristics and quirks of his handwriting. On the back of each draft I pencilled its number in the sequence. When I'd established which was the latest version, I dealt with any anomalies of wording, punctuation, layout, etc., by referring back to the preceding drafts. I discussed the outcome with Beryl and Lucia, and once we had a 'final' version Beryl typed it out.

From some fifty poems that emerged, Beryl made, in April 1990, a selection of fourteen, with eight that I'd heard at the birthday reading. We agreed on the order, and on a title, that of one of the poems: *Across the Gulf*. A limited edition of 175 copies were beautifully printed and bound by Tomás Graves and his wife Carmen García-Gutierrez at their New Seizin Press.<sup>5</sup>



All Graves's books of poetry were in his library at Canellun, and during the following two years (Lucia and I having embarked on another literary project, a Spanish edition of short stories by Katherine Mansfield),<sup>6</sup> I immersed myself in his work. There were constant discoveries and surprises. I became increasingly aware of how much of his poetry Graves had suppressed, and how this had adversely affected his critical standing. My own response was confirmed by certain of the critics I read. J. M. Cohen's presentation copy of the first (1960) book-length study is inscribed, 'I hope that this will persuade you to restore some of

your rejected poems to the next collected volume'; he refers to two such poems, 'The Clipped Stater' and 'Virgil the Sorcerer', as 'the most undeserved of all the victims of Graves's poetic purges.'<sup>7</sup> In what is still the definitive study, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (1989), D. N. G. Carter states that 'it is necessary to defend Graves not only against critics, but against himself as well. The only collection available to the reader who does not possess any of his earlier volumes is the final *Collected Poems 1975*, [ . . . ] as injurious to Graves's reputation by what it omits as by what it includes.'<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the whole corpus of Graves's poetry had to be republished. Only then would it be possible to make a just appraisal of his work, and to affirm his status as a major twentieth century poet. But how would Beryl view this proposition? And Graves's son William, his literary executor?

During the Robert Graves birthday celebration in July 1992, I took part with my brother in a performance of the opening scene of Graves's 1930 play, *But It Still Goes On*. A few days later, on 29 July, Beryl and I were looking at books and manuscripts of poems in Graves's study. As my diary records,

I suggested that what was needed was a complete *Poems*, with a minimum of notes, etc.; that much of his work was out of print, inaccessible, and/or weeded out by Robert Graves; that many reviews, Carter's book, etc., referred to this. I suggested we should begin ourselves [...], with the aim of getting it published in the anniversary year, 1995. She agreed at once (i.e. as soon as I'd explained what I meant), as did Lucia next day when Beryl told her. Lucia said Beryl thought we should go ahead and worry about a publisher, etc. later. We decided it would be best to bring the subject up with William next time he was at Canellun for, say, afternoon tea (rather than going deputation-wise up to the Posada).<sup>9</sup> And in fact he called that afternoon

– and approved. My diary continues:

I started the following day looking at the earliest vols (Beryl's proposed procedure – book by book, in chronological order). After supper [...] she got out of the chest the library's [copies of] *Over the Brazier; Fairies and Fusiliers; Treasure Box*; Hogarth Press editions including *The Marmosite's Miscellany* (these were from 1920s, published at Tavistock Sq.) Wonderful. Am going back in September for two weeks working on the project.



From the outset, some crucial editorial issues had to be addressed. There was surely a strong case for an edition containing all the published poems. In the course of preparing each of his seven volumes of *Collected Poems* from 1926 to 1965, Graves suppressed a substantial proportion of his work.

‘A volume of collected poems should form a sequence of the intenser moments of the poet's spiritual autobiography’, Graves states in the Foreword to *Poems and Satires 1951*. In continually reshaping the canon, he was creating different versions of his life story (‘It is myself that I remake’, as Yeats put it).<sup>10</sup> By the time he was choosing and rejecting work for the 1965 *Collected*, there was ‘one story and one story only’,<sup>11</sup> a love story whose pattern and protagonists he had defined in *The White Goddess*. ‘The main reason for discarding [earlier poems] should be that one suspects lovelessness’, he declares in the 1965 Foreword, and most of the poems written after 1960 are in fact love poems or poems about love.

By 1965 little more than a third of the pre-1960 poetry was left in the canon. The range had been narrowed, and some of the finest poems removed.

In failing health, Graves could not continue thinning out his poetry for *Collected Poems 1975*, which reprints the 1965 volume

intact and adds 270 more poems written since then. This was Graves's eighth *Collected* and by far his largest: 633 poems, 592 pages. It was his last book.

The 1975 canon was 'top-heavy', as Paul O'Prey observes in his ground-breaking 1986 Penguin *Selected*:<sup>12</sup> more than two-thirds of the poems dated from the last fifteen years. Our objective in putting together the *Complete Poems* was to restore the balance and reveal the full scope of Graves's poetry. Nonetheless, we felt it was essential to record each version of the canon by listing the contents of the successive volumes of *Collected Poems*, detailing the additions and deletions, and the changes Graves made to the arrangement of the work. We compiled a list of all the printings of each poem, so that its publication history could be easily traced.

The Introduction to Volume I of the *Complete Poems* begins: 'The aim of this edition is to make available, for the first time, all the poems that Robert Graves published, together with a selection of his unpublished work.' Were we justified in printing poems that that the poet himself rejected? In Beryl's and my judgement, we were.

Graves acknowledges, in that same Foreword to *Poems and Satires 1951*, that editors of future anthologies 'may even choose to revive verses which, because I know that they are in some way defective, I have done my best to suppress'. Moreover, his own practice wasn't wholly consistent: the 1951 book actually contains four poems 'more than twenty years old' which he omitted from the 1948 *Collected*. In the 1929 *Good-bye to All That* he dismisses 'In the Wilderness', his popular poem about Christ, as 'a silly, quaint poem',<sup>13</sup> yet though he excludes it from the contents of *Collected Poems* (1938) he smuggles it back in by quoting it in its entirety in the Foreword, where he also reprints in full another early poem, 'To R. N.', written in 1917 on the Somme, together with extracts from seventeen more. 'In the Wilderness' was officially readmitted to the canon ten years later, in the 1948 *Collected Poems*, and remained there: in *Collected Poems 1975* it is still the opening poem.

Counting the four in *Poems and Satires 1951*, Graves restored some forty earlier poems in books published from 1943 to 1964; in 1958 he also sent a typescript of seventeen poems for an anthology, *Seeds in the Wind: Juvenilia from W. B. Yeats to Ted Hughes*, edited by Neville Braybrooke. (It finally appeared in 1989, with three of Graves's poems in it.)

Another consideration was that while Graves claimed he did his best to suppress poems, he still kept every set of proofs, every draft, even if written on a bit of wood he picked up at the beach or on the back of an in-flight drinks list. He consigned a vast quantity of manuscripts in 1959 to the State University of New York at Buffalo, which formed the basis of its Robert Graves Collection, and further batches went to other North American libraries.

Fifteen suppressed poems had already been revived by O'Prey in the 1986 Penguin *Selected*, and a body of war poetry by William Graves in the 1988 and 1990 editions of *Poems About War*.<sup>14</sup>



In the *Complete Poems* we decided that the order of the poems should correspond to the first editions of Graves's books, but that the texts of the poems should be the last versions that he approved.

'My poetry-writing has always been a painful process of continual corrections and corrections on top of corrections and persistent dissatisfaction', Graves wrote in *Good-bye to All That*.<sup>15</sup> His choice of the word 'corrections' is significant; as Graves himself expressed it, in a letter of 3 June 1954 to James Reeves, he had an 'obsession about getting poems *right*'.<sup>16</sup> Composition meant making draft after draft (thirty-five for 'The Troll's Nosegay'), then emending and recasting in manuscripts and typescripts, with revisions often continuing in the printed versions over years or even decades. 'Revision, for Graves, was not just a question of craftsmanship, consummate craftsman though he was. It was an integral part of the actual process of composition'.<sup>17</sup>

In the notes to our edition we recorded all the differences – changes in wording, punctuation and layout, deleted lines and stanzas – between the first book version and the last (plus, exceptionally, important intervening revisions). The edition thus reproduces two complete versions of the poems.

For the latest versions, textual anomalies, misprints, etc. were corrected in the light of previous printed versions and manuscripts. These emendations are recorded in the notes. The notes also give background information on the poems, with quotations from and/or references to other poems by Graves, and his letters, diaries and prose writings.

Three scholarly works proved indispensable: the Higginson and Williams bibliography; the *Selected Letters*, edited in two volumes by Paul O’Prey; and Richard Perceval Graves’s three-volume biography.<sup>18</sup>

Establishing the texts and writing the notes was a lengthy and painstaking task. We kept to a procedure from the beginning. Beryl and I each prepared notes on the poems, listing the variants, and then I collated them and made a finished version. I drafted the notes on each of Graves’s books, and the introductions to the three volumes of our edition. We discussed everything together, and she read through and commented on everything I wrote. Her comments were normally approving and encouraging, though from time to time she would protest about my detailed references: ‘Do we have to put that? Surely they can look it up for themselves?’ I recall only two serious disagreements. One was about ‘Rocky Acres’ (‘The first poem I wrote as myself’, Graves termed it).<sup>19</sup> In the 1920 *Country Sentiment* version the buzzard ‘catches the trembling of small hidden things, | He tears them in pieces, dropping from the sky’, which Graves revised to ‘dropping *them* from the sky’ [my italics] in the 1948 *Collected*. ‘It doesn’t make sense,’ Beryl complained. The other was the spelling of a word in an unpublished poem, the last poem in our edition, ‘The Pressure Gauge’. Beryl wanted to keep Graves’s manuscript mis-

spelling, 'guage' (which I discovered he'd corrected elsewhere). In the end I prevailed, if ruefully.

At Canellun I had the privilege of working at Graves's desk in his study, where I could consult his annotated copies of his first editions, and the reference books that he had used. Beryl worked in the Press Room adjoining the study, except when she was typing upstairs. She insisted on typing out every one of the 1202 poems herself. That way, she said, she could get inside them. I wrote everything in longhand and Beryl typed it up, or I did so in Paris. For the finished texts of the books we initially used an Amstrad computer, exasperatingly slow and cumbersome (six separate manipulations were required to go into italics and come out again). For Volumes II and III we graduated, thanks to William, to a PC.

An essential part of the project consisted of preparing lists of manuscripts of published and unpublished poems and printings in periodicals, and ordering copies from collections in libraries, principally the Robert Graves Collection at Buffalo, or photocopying them ourselves. Lucia played a vital role in all of this.



Sixteen months after we started work on our edition, William phoned me in Paris, on 20 November 1993, with news of a breakthrough: Michael Schmidt, of Carcanet Press, was going to publish the poems, together with most of the prose titles, in a so-called Robert Graves Programme.

Over the following six years Beryl and I maintained our editorial routine. I spent all or part of my university vacations – in February, the spring, the summer, November – at Canellun. I slept upstairs in what once was Riding's workroom. There was a view from the table by the window across the olive trees and cypresses to the sea. Beryl had breakfast first; I would come downstairs to find coffee made and my place set at the kitchen table, with

---

perhaps a book which she'd promised to find for me. We worked steadily all day; one long humid summer I took only four days off. 'You *must* go out,' Beryl would say to me towards the end of the afternoon, and I'd go for a walk above the cliffs and, in warm weather, swim off the rocks. During the summer Lucia used to drive Beryl and me down to the Cala for a morning bathe. Beryl did the cooking, on a venerable Aga supplemented by a stove outside the kitchen door. She had a repertoire of tasty dishes, including an exemplary gazpacho. On fine nights we dined out on the terrace, maybe in the company of visiting family or friends. From time to time we would eat in the village or at one of the two fish restaurants down at the Cala, or, on special occasions, at an excellent cliff-top restaurant, Bens d'Avall, off the road north to Soller. In the evenings we played countless games of Scrabble.

Early in June 1994 I went to the village of Kirtlington, near Oxford, to discuss our edition with the General Editor of the Robert Graves Programme, Patrick Quinn. Patrick was part-American, part-Canadian, a lecturer at Nene College of Higher Education, later the University of Northampton. He was editing a new selected Graves for Carcanet,<sup>20</sup> and had opted for the earliest printed versions of the poems. 'I find them more vibrant,' he said. When I told him we had chosen the latest versions, he said that was fine by him.

Thanks to a British Academy grant, I was able to travel to the United States in April 1995 to do research on the Graves holdings at the State University of New York at Buffalo and the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. My reception at Buffalo was a testing one. I was directed to the office of the Curator of the Poetry/Rare Books Collection, Dr Robert Bertholf, to whom I'd written about the *Complete Poems* edition. Bertholf was a professional editor, specialising in the poetry of Robert Duncan. 'They'll crucify you' were his first words to me. I responded that I believed our editorial approach to Graves was valid. He gave me a pile of photocopied articles and chapters from books by the current authorities on textual editing and criticism,

and I passed some rather fraught hours that night reading through them in my funeral motel room. Was printing the poems in the latest versions a hubristic blunder?

When at last I went to bed I was feeling somewhat reassured. Our editorial decisions appeared to be supported by, or at the least compatible with, everything that I'd read, in particular Jerome K. McGann's critique of the long-ruling Greg-Bowers theory of scholarly editing with its emphasis on early rather than late states of text, and McGann's preference for versions rather than eclectic (multiple source) editions.<sup>21</sup> Our edition seemed to comply sufficiently with D. F. McKenzie's ban on combining different texts ('we must not conflate any one version with any other'),<sup>22</sup> and to be consonant with the theory of versions elaborated most recently by Jack Stillinger.<sup>23</sup> What also emerged was that the choice of version had to be made in relation to the specific texts being edited. There was no single valid editorial approach. What was appropriate for Wordsworth, or for Coleridge, would not necessarily apply to Yeats, or to Marianne Moore, or to Auden. Each textual case had to be treated on an individual basis.

In the morning I put this forward in detail to Robert Bertholf. He was convinced. The library's Graves material and his staff were at my disposal. From then on Bertholf, a warm-hearted, enthusiastic scholar, provided invaluable support for the edition, together with his assistant and eventual successor, Michael Basinski. Mike would wheel out trolleys of manuscripts from the air-conditioned room in which they'd been preserved in special folders since their delivery from Mallorca, where they'd lain for months in a dusty shed after being transported there by donkey-cart. I spent a busy week studying the manuscripts and making notes in the pleasant oak-panelled library, under the disquieting gaze of Robert Graves: a huge portrait by John Ulbricht showing only that formidable head, considerably larger than life, as indeed was Graves himself.

I returned to Buffalo and to the Berg Collection in 1996, to study manuscripts of poems for the second volume, covering the years 1927 to 1959, and to seek out unpublished poems for the third.

There were some moving relics at Buffalo, such as Graves's army satchel, and the volume of Keats, inscribed in 1915 by 'his affectionate father', which he carried with him in France.



Volume I of the *Complete Poems* appeared in November of the centenary year, 1995. I gave a talk about the edition at the centenary conference at Oxford in August, at Graves's old college, St John's. 'It was lovely', Beryl said afterwards. 'You were noble.' Amid the generations of Graveses at a memorable garden party were his daughter Catherine and his son Sam, and his niece Sally Chilver.

In the *TLS* the poet Neil Powell described Volume I as 'a revelation'.<sup>24</sup> Reviewing it in the *Scotsman*, another poet, Robert Nye, stated:

To begin to understand Graves it is vital to understand the nature of his passion for revision. It sprang, paradoxically, from a belief in inspiration. Graves, more than any of his contemporaries, had a strong sense of a poem as something 'given'. The poet's initial task is to be open to the possibility of being inspired, then to act as a kind of secretary to hidden powers, finally to work on what those powers give him until the result is linguistically and rhythmically as exact as he can make it. At the root of this process is a belief that the poem, the thing made, has a life of its own which might be more enduring than the poet who makes it.<sup>25</sup>

Volume II of the *Complete Poems* was published in 1997. 'The editing is admirable' Robert Nye wrote, again in the *Scotsman*; in *Poetry Review* Neil Powell asked: 'Will they at last prove to be the twentieth century's finest body of English lyric poetry?'<sup>26</sup>

Volume III included sixty-nine of Graves's unpublished poems, fourteen of them from *Across the Gulf*. In selecting them, we gave

priority to poems whose publication had been approved by Graves but was prevented by some external factor (in one case, cuts wanted by the wartime printers), or poems that had been treated by Graves as finished. At the launch party in November 1999 at Lucia's house in Putney, Carcanet was represented by Robyn Marsack, our patient and understanding editor; she ended her speech by proposing a toast to Beryl.

The Carcanet *Complete Poems in One Volume* appeared in 2000, and the Penguin Classics edition of this in 2003. All five books received extensive and favourable reviews, including a six-and-a-half-page review of the three-volume edition by Ronald Gaskell in the authoritative journal *Essays in Criticism*, which concludes: 'I have hardly been able to suggest the range and quality of the editorial notes that buttress each volume of the *Complete Poems*. [...] If any [...] revaluation [of Graves's poetry] is to be undertaken seriously, the three Carcanet volumes will be indispensable.'<sup>27</sup> Penguin quoted Sean O'Brien's *Guardian* review of the one-volume edition on the cover of their complete Graves: 'Monumental ... No one else offers his precise combination of eroticism, nightmare and epigram'.<sup>28</sup>

The Penguin Classics volume has made the poetry accessible at last to the general public, as has Michael Longley's superb Faber *Selected Poems*, for which he used our texts.



I regretted, of course, never meeting Robert Graves. When I once said this to his son Juan, however, he replied that perhaps it was for the best; by the 1970s his father was fading, and I wouldn't have met the man as he had been.

Yet at Deyá Graves was still everywhere around me: in his study, amidst his books and treasures; on his walks through the olive groves; at the Cala, where he used to dive off the high rocks for his daily swim. In the summer I helped Beryl water the fruit trees and flowers and vegetables in his garden and tend the

descendants of his compost heaps. In one birthday play I wore his striped waistcoat.

I had resolved from the beginning not to take advantage of Beryl's hospitality and friendship to enquire into her personal memories of Robert (which, from early on, she allowed me to call him). Nevertheless, reserved as she was, very much a private person, she would occasionally speak directly of him: the way when travelling he would strike up a conversation with complete strangers; or take a tasty-looking piece of food from somebody else's plate; or how he liked washing the dishes, as it helped him to think about what he was writing; or his custom of bowing nine times to the new moon.

Lucia, too, would tell me about her father, whom it was clear she had loved unreservedly. My favourite story was how, when she was upset as a child by a nightmare, he would pretend to search for it on her head until he cried 'I've found it!' and took it to throw it down the loo.

Natalia recounted that in his old age her grandfather could get angry if she and the other children made a noise 'while he was thinking'; once he shook his stick at them, but later came out again and gave each of them twenty-five pesetas, to make up for it.

And Graves himself would sometimes suddenly appear, startlingly realistic versions of him, in the features of William or Juan. But it was Lucia, I thought, who seemed to have inherited the poet's aura.

Beryl and my mother became good friends, writing to each other and exchanging gifts. They shared a love of reading and gardening. On one of my mother's visits to Canellun, while Beryl was talking with my sister Ann in Graves's study about my work editing the poems, Beryl said, 'He has brought Robert back to me.'

*This article is based on the text of the Robert Graves Society Talk given on 11 July 2018 during the Fourteenth International Robert Graves Conference at Palma and Deyá, Mallorca.*

**Dunstan Ward** is the co-editor of the *Complete Poems* of Robert Graves, and the author of two volumes of poems, *Beyond Puketapu* (2015) and *At This Distance* (2019).

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber, 2013), Introduction, p. xxvi; *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (1950) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 110. The full quotation: ‘The poetry of Robert Graves is in some ways the purest poetry produced in our time, waving no flags, addressed to no congregations, designed neither to comfort nor persuade. It is poetry rooted in everyday experience, but it always has the quality of making that experience new, pungent and exciting.’ Longley comments that this ‘clear-headed opinion [. . .] still seems spot-on.’

<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995, 1997, 1999); *Complete Poems in One Volume* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000); *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Complete Poems*, II, pp. 275–76, 321–22.

<sup>4</sup> Named after the protagonist in Mikhail Bulgakov’s satirical novel *Heart of a Dog* (1925).

<sup>5</sup> The edition is dated 1992; it appeared in 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Katherine Mansfield: Preludio y otros relatos*, introduction and selection by Dunstan Ward, translation by Lucia Graves and Elena Lambea (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves, Writers and Critics*, 3 (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Acquired by his father, the Posada (‘Inn’) became the Deyá residence of William Graves.

---

<sup>10</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Collected Works in Verse and Prose*, 8 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908), II, preliminary poem.

<sup>11</sup> 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice', *Complete Poems* (Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. 405–06.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Graves, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (1929), ed. by Fran Brearton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2014), pp. 25–29.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Graves, *Poems About War*, ed. by William Graves (London: Cassell, 1988; Mt. Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> *Good-bye to All That*, p. 395.

<sup>16</sup> *Between Moon and Moon: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1946–1972*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> *Complete Poems* (Penguin Classics, 2003), Introduction, p. xlv.

<sup>18</sup> Fred H. Higginson, *A Bibliography of the Writings of Robert Graves*, 2nd edn, rev. by William Proctor Williams (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1987); *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946*, ed. by Paul O'Prey, (London: Hutchinson, 1982), *Between Moon and Moon: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1946–1972*; Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895–1926, The Years with Laura 1926–1940, Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940–1985* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986, 1990, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> *Good-bye to All That*, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Graves, *The Centenary Selected Poems*, ed. by Patrick J. Quinn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983; repr. 1992).

<sup>22</sup> D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, The Panizzi Lectures, 1985 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Neil Powell, 'Ruthless Innocence', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 November 1995, pp. 6–7 (p. 6).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Nye, 'Vision and Revision', *Scotsman*, 6 January 1996, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Nye, 'Here is the Muse', *Scotsman*, 13 December 1997; Neil Powell, 'Leaving the Rest Unsaid', *Poetry Review*, December 1997, pp. 88–89 (p. 89).

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Gaskell, 'Getting It Right', *Essays in Criticism*, 51.3, July 2001, pp. 378–84 (pp. 383–84).

<sup>28</sup> Sean O'Brien, 'A Muse of Fire', *Guardian*, 13 January 2001, p. 10.

---

# Straddling the Fence: Robert Graves, Victorian and Modernist Modes of Writing about the Past

Alicja Bemben

## Introduction

Change in human character takes time; it also takes plenty of grit and tenacity. However, situations beyond one's ken that necessitate such changes occur. The Great War occurred. It obliterated millions and left survivors dazed and disoriented. And even though the Victorian, the Belle Époque, the realistic-naturalistic and many other mindsets had already started to decay, this war seems to have lent the strongest impetus to the socio-intellectual changes that had been spreading in Western Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century.

From among these changes, the *sensu largo* object of interest of this text is the shift that took place in the field of historiography at the beginning of the twentieth century. The devaluation of the notions on which the late nineteenth-century paradigm of historiography was built resulted in this very paradigm losing its dominance. With room for new socio-intellectual vistas to open up, the modernist paradigm thrived.<sup>1</sup> The *sensu stricto* object of interest in this article is Robert Graves's Claudian dilogy (*I, Claudius* [1934], and *Claudius the God: and His Wife Messalina* [1935]), which I would like to examine, first, as a text that reflects the change in the historical mode of narrating past that occurred at the beginning of the century. The second purpose of my article is to show how Graves's mode of narrating the past – as it surfaces in the Claudius books – serves to position him within the historiographic landscape that formed after the Great War.<sup>2</sup>

In order to substantiate both propositions, I follow several coordinated lines of argument. The first part of this text opens with a précis of Peter Burke's theory of the key elements of Western historical thinking,<sup>3</sup> in which the basic tenets of his theory are delineated and, to focus more clearly on Graves, the details of his so-called mode of writing about the past examined. In this case, I focus on the characteristics of the modes of writing about the past that dominated in the history writing of the late Victorian and modernist England. I conclude this section with a discussion of how Graves's Claudian dilogy draws on and/or distances itself from both these modes.

The second part of this work, informed by Kenneth J. Gergen's concept of the relational self, starts with a brief recapitulation of Gergen's idea that one's socio-intellectual functioning is shaped by the choices of narrative conventions one makes to handle social and private situations.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I only focus on Gergen's conventions that seem most pertinent to Graves's texts, in particular, the so-called narrative negotiation of dependency. In the conclusion section, I summarise my findings and capitalise on them by addressing some of their implications.

### **Robert Graves's Drawing on the Victorian and Modernist Modes of Writing about the Past**

In 'Western Historical Thinking in a Global Perspective – 10 Theses', Peter Burke puts forward a set of concepts that he deems to be constitutive of Western historical thinking. For him, each model of such thinking is a unique amalgamation of approaches to the following concepts: time, cultural distance, a/historicism, agency, historical knowledge, causality, objectivity, scriptocentrism, mode of writing about the real, and space.<sup>5</sup> Although the author does not discuss even one such model that has fuelled Western European history writing, he does expand on the concepts he enumerates. Out of these, the one I would like to

concentrate on concerns the mode of writing about the real. When elaborating on it, Burke points to the fact that, within each model of historical thinking, one can notice idiosyncratic ways in which historians mould their narratives about the past. According to him, these ways – or mythemes, as he labels them most likely after Levi-Strauss – depend on the widely accepted perception of reality. To illustrate this observation, Burke adduces examples of historians who depict the past following the manner of *tragedy* (Polybius, Thucydides), *epic* (sixteenth- and seventeenth-century luminaries), and *progress* (Ernst Cassirer), arguing that these are the mythemes that constituted the generally accepted perception of the real at their respective times (Burke 2002a, pp. 26-27).

With this in mind, I would like to reconstruct the general ways in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English historiographers tended to mould their narratives, i.e. to delineate the mythemes organising their writings. According to Georg Iggers, the main difference between late nineteenth-century historians and their early twentieth-century counterparts hinges on their contrasting attitudes toward dominant narratives. Nineteenth century historians sought to create ‘a grand narrative of the history of man [..., a] story with a central plot in which individuals take their place’;<sup>6</sup> but later historians tended to retreat from grand narratives, preferring to emphasise the complexity, orderliness and disorderliness of the past as well as the purposefulness and contingency of the heterogeneous forces shaping it.

The Victorian mytheme is quite reassuring when likened to the one that succeeded it. The grand narrative assured its proponents that they were at the peak of human progress with a bright future ahead of them; that their senses gave them the one and only unshakeable, coherent and unchangeable truth; that, with enough diligence, self-discipline and firmness, they could come up with detailed workings of the world and reproduce them in their own lives and texts. But, as it happens with many noble ideas, the progressive vision of reality could not stand up to a

reality check. The Great War and its aftermath, by and large, rendered it null and void.<sup>7</sup>

Eschewing all-embracing and allegedly stable socio-intellectual frames of reference, early twentieth-century historians embraced the chaos of shifting constructs, continuous sense of the inadequacy of their thoughts about the real and enervating deficiency of certainties. No new grand narrative emerged to replace the progress of humanity concept, leaving individuals free to come up with their own ideas about the real. Nevertheless, for historians, the conceptual polyphony that followed did not decline into frivolous subjectivity and chaos. For them, the real became more of a set of objects and features, contingencies and certainties, as well as states and processes driven and concatenated by both physical and mental forces in-between all of which they saw, and hence, showed historical figures as trying to make their lives meaningful.<sup>8</sup>



The chapters of the dilogy that cover Claudius's childhood give the impression that the real to which Graves introduces his hero is constructed as if it were logical, coherent, and well-organised, and that what precludes Claudius from understanding the workings of the world are deficiencies in his knowledge and/or interpretation of his milieu. The young protagonist has problems with learning, he is not really capable of making himself liked, he fails in carrying out simple duties. In contrast to his brother Germanicus's popularity, Lucius's cleverness and Antonia's and Julia's beauty, he seems to display no quality that would help him to find his place among the Roman elites. However, over the course of time, Graves makes his hero grasp both the alleged workings of his world and, more notably, 'their' – or rather what their interpreters envision as their – shortcomings. From a teacher pointing to every mistake, Cato grows in Claudius's eyes into a self-important brute; no longer the actual manager of the Roman empire, Livia

turns out to be a fearful woman consumed by her apprehension of a hellish penance for her atrocities.<sup>9</sup> With these discoveries, Claudius proceeds to produce his own logical theories about his sound reality, until 'a series of unfortunate events' wrecks his schemes and lays bare the futility of formulating theories based on the 'real is logical' assumption. Only when he juxtaposes the revelations of Herod's obsession with power, Messalina's nymphomania, Agrippina's thirst for influence, and Britannicus's craze for the title of emperor, does Claudius conclude that the vision of reality which he has cherished for so long is simply naive.<sup>10</sup> The ending of Claudius's life is marked by his painful yet intellectually brave realisation that his reality is not as ordered or organisable as he has supposed, that it is formed of people's rational but also irrational needs and/or impulses.

What might strike one at this point as a very peculiar authorial strategy is not only that Claudius's realisation arrives so late in his life, but that the story gives no hint of the mature perspective of a man with forty-nine years of experience and with a thorough knowledge about the unsoundness of his reality writing his autobiography until its last chapters.<sup>11</sup> From the outset, Graves makes Claudius subject everything and everybody to an almost academic scrutiny. The results fail him at first, then, compel him to seek a more sophisticated explanation of the workings of his world. Following closely Claudius's initial pursuits, readers may indeed end up with the impression that Claudius's real is sound and his misapprehensions about given situations result from insufficient data and/or their inadequate processing.<sup>12</sup> Unless one is familiar with this type of narrative construction – or as long as one does not jump ahead to the last chapters of the diology in which the protagonist's plans become conclusively wrecked – such an interpretation of Claudius's logicalise-fail-repeat pattern might seem feasible. But the further one reads, the clearer it becomes that Graves has set out to demonstrate that Claudius's problem lies in assuming he can understand the world, in the rationalistic sense. Claudius's assumption of the world's inherent

orderliness turns out to be his wishful thinking. And, if this is so, then Claudius's misinterpretations might serve as evidence of the unsoundness of his real.<sup>13</sup>

However, it would be incorrect to suggest that Graves is of one mind as regards this question. *I, Claudius* does not set out to depict an irrational world, or a mad historian. The real in it is never unsound to its extreme – to use the cliché, not thoroughly unsound. The proposed construct is, on the one hand, so unsound as to foreclose its comprehensive rational understanding, but, on the other, sound enough to comprise certain logical patterns – such as situation-related laws that even the lunatic emperor (without money Caligula would not afford his whims) and obedient soldiers (regardless of the situation, the Roman soldiers obey their commanders) need to observe.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, if Graves designates Claudius's real as predominantly unsound – most likely as a result of realising the unsoundness of his own world<sup>15</sup> – but, nonetheless, makes the hero struggle to find his own place and make his dreams come true, perhaps, his retreat from the late nineteenth-century concept of the sound real does not amount to its categorical repudiation. It would seem that he follows one of the modernist trends that do not wholly reject the achievements of Victorian historiography but take a more moderate stance, allowing that the real functions on both the irrational (to a larger extent) and the rational (to a smaller extent).

### **The Claudian Dilogy as Graves's Means of Situating Himself against/within the Victorian and Modernist Modes of Writing about the Past**

Graves's stance reflects his efforts to situate himself within the intellectual traditions that shaped the post-WWI world and broadly defined history-writing. To explore the details of this process, I would like to avail myself of the mentioned theory of

one's socio-intellectual functioning proposed by Gergen. According to Gergen, the way the self – or as he calls it, the relational self – plays out a given situation depends on its use of available and/or relevant narrative conventions.<sup>16</sup> In most cases, there exists an imposed narrative which is considered primary for the given situation. The self may follow it – and hence, support it – or disagree with it – and hence, try to destroy, destabilise or substantially remould it. Graves's dilogy also presents a situation – fighting for the better future of Rome – in which the self – Claudius – affects the dependencies between dominating and competing narratives via, as I intend to show, negotiating these dependencies.<sup>17</sup> In what follows, I wish to show that Claudius's change in orientation is a narrative device by which Graves critically negotiates his own retreat from the late nineteenth-century English historiographical idea of world order to justify aligning himself with the modernist embrace of disorder.

The sense of order and reasonableness is one of the key intellectual attributes with which Graves endows his protagonist. Young Claudius, as befits an aspiring historian, roots in time-worn manuscripts and contemporary social affairs to formulate a comprehensive vision of his reality. Researching and cataloguing the past and the present becomes his means of escaping the brutalities concocted by his relatives and soon melts into a passion morphing to an *idée fixe*.<sup>18</sup> Thus, initially, world order is shown in the dilogy as an ideal whose comprehension is a worthy goal, and hence, as a value the text seems to assert. But, as one follows the story, this impression starts wearing off. Piecemeal, the knowledge Claudius and the reader are granted reveals the naiveté of many of his (and our) judgements, especially those related to the world order.<sup>19</sup>

Step by step, Graves reveals that the Roman world order cannot be grasped by reason alone (but, initially, refrains from a full conclusion). As if to prepare the ground for an irresistible critical attack, he has Claudius attempt yet another world order vision test – this time, his own vision of the better future of the Roman

Empire, which fails because the protagonist is incapable of eradicating the tyranny with his own hands. Only then does Graves move on to re-evaluating the underlying premise (rather than faulting the application). First, he has Claudius highlight the fact that order is maker-dependent, and hence, not an inherent property of the real.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, he puts into Claudius's mouth the comment that the emperors seem to come, scrabble with ordering their real according to their wishes and go crestfallen at their failures, at best. At worst, 'monarchy [also] turns [their] wits'.<sup>21</sup> He saw, after all, Tiberius and Caligula – and could add himself to the set – enter the Julio-Claudian tradition of supervising the Empire. None of them, however, squeezes himself or herself into the predetermined role of the Empire caretaker. On the contrary, ignoring, by and large, their predecessors' achievements, each of them uses the obtained goods and privileges to impose a world order of their own design.<sup>22</sup> In this way, Graves demonstrates how superficial, volatile, and non-persistent world orders are.

Thirdly and most importantly, blind adherence to the idea of world order, and making it the foundation of one's perception of the real, is shown as irrational because the world does not follow along a logical course toward rationally predicted outcomes. When, bearing the above in mind, broken Claudius starts re-evaluating the past, he makes the world orders of the Etruscans, Britons, or Germanic tribes, appear in a new light, this time, as examples of visions which keep crumpling and getting replaced by their allegedly upgraded, yet similarly unsuccessful versions.<sup>23</sup>

If, in the last chapters of the dilogy, world order is revealed as an unstable and devalued concept uncritical allegiance to which entails certain catastrophe, one must wonder what alternative Graves would have in its place. Ostensibly, he seems to propose nothing. Between Claudius's collapse and his final words, there is just one paragraph, in which we find no solution, no redeeming value:

My eyes are weary, and my hand shakes so much that I can hardly form the letters. Strange portents have been seen of late. A great comet like that which foretold the death of Julius Caesar has long been blazing in the midnight sky. From Egypt a phoenix has been reported. It flew there from Arabia, as its custom is, followed by a flock of admiring other birds. I can hardly think that it was a true phoenix, for that appears only once every 1,461 years, and only 250 years have elapsed since it was last genuinely reported from Heliopolis in the reign of the third Ptolemy; but certainly it was some sort of phoenix. And as if a phoenix and comet were not sufficient marvels, a centaur has been born in Thessaly and brought to me at Rome (by way of Egypt where the Alexandrian doctors first examined it), and I have handled it with my own hands. It only lived a single day, and came to me preserved in honey, but it was an unmistakable centaur, and of the sort which has a horse's body, not the inferior sort which has an ass's body. Phoenix, comet, and centaur, a swarm of bees among the standards at the Guards Camp, a pig farrowed with claws like a hawk, and my father's monument struck by lightning! Prodigies enough, soothsayers? (Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 418)

In these lines, the narrator merely inventories portents spotted recently in the Roman Empire: a comet, phoenix, centaur; and laments his tiredness. Taken at face value, it would seem that Graves excuses himself from proposing his own theory about the real.<sup>24</sup>

However, in his silence, Graves would seem to be siding with the modernists who explicitly abstain from offering up alternatives to the progressive vision of the world, as an ideological principle. Clearing the field of macrotheories of that type, they attempt to show that microtheories applied to particular historical situations have greater explanatory value, or, to phrase it more grandly, the historical real does not tend toward some telos but operates as

much on contingency as on individuals' purposeful actions.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, rather than a sign of negligence or anxiety, Graves's silence is simultaneously his declaration of retreat from the telic conception of historical reality and an advance upon a conception that allows for the coincidence of opposites: certainty with contingency, truth with lies, and chaos with order.

## Conclusions

A person born into a reality that appears, from the outset of one's life, to intimate and (on reflection) to turn out to be patently liquid, might develop a sense of longing for an idealised past that operates in line with some world order.<sup>26</sup> However, a person who is reared believing that his or her real is ordered, unambiguous and continuously progressing towards some better and brighter future, only to have this belief shattered by experience, would be more likely to struggle with the cognitive dissonance regarding the devastated ideal.<sup>27</sup>

Robert Graves is an example of the latter type but also an example of an individual who skilfully manages such dissonance. On the one hand, he avails himself of selected achievements of Victorian historicism, and hence, shows himself to be thoughtful enough not to reject *in toto* the tradition in which he was born and educated. On the other hand, having demonstrated respect for the achievements of this tradition and benefited from its selective use, he distances himself from it. But, since Graves is not the only one handling such cognitive dissonance, one might wonder if, by any chance, his nimble balancing between intellectual stances might be typical of an early twentieth-century individual and, in particular, historiographer.

When it comes to the condition of early twentieth-century humanity, it might be rather obvious to conclude that Graves is yet another case confirming that to be human means to straddle the fence. But, less obviously, Graves's straddling is of a peculiar

---

character. When disillusioned with a certain idea, intellectual tradition, etc., people tend to turn their backs on the source of their distress and think that discarding an idea means they have renounced their affinities with it. They have ‘evolved’. But Graves makes thrifty use of the failed Victorian ideal. Not only do his actions indicate a respect for this tradition but, when understood as an intellectual gesture, they seem to predate the developments of Harold Bloom or, to be more historical-context accurate, Ewa Domańska.<sup>28</sup> According to her, we may wish to think that ideas, worldviews, and social trends come and then fade into oblivion; and, as it might also be added, that we differ substantively from our eighteenth- or nineteenth-century predecessors. But we might notice instead that, even when we abandon a socio-intellectual milieu, we are left with mental baggage; and our culture cannot but develop on, following Domańska’s concept, the humic foundations left by bygone generations.<sup>29</sup>

When it comes to the implications of the fact that modernist writings about the past – as it might be surmised, Graves again participates in a wider trend – did not abandon the idea of order *in toto* but rather recalibrated its application to particular situations, one might of course feel goaded into concluding that just as the humic foundations of our predecessors shape the world so they shape history writing. Pertinent as this inference is, I would like to offer one more thought that this gesture seems to invite: if order is a construct that historians keep cherishing and which, in various iterations, seems to be an unalienable part of their practice,<sup>30</sup> the problem it generates might not be that it is a construct imposed on reality but that it should be kept made meaningful to be acceptable.

**Alicja Bemben** is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Literary Studies at the University of Silesia. She has co-edited several monographs and authored a number of texts dealing with historiography and historical novels.

---

 NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 284-285, 309.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves, *I, Claudius. From the Autobiography of Tiberius Claudius Emperor of the Romans: Born 10 B. C., Murdered and Deified A. D. 54* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) and *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina: The Troublesome Reign of Tiberius Claudius Caesar, Emperor of the Romans (Born 10 B. C., Died A. D. 54), as Described by Himself; Also His Murder at the Hands of the Notorious Agrippina (Mother of the Emperor Nero) and His Subsequent Deification, as Described by Others* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Burke, 'Western Historical Thinking in a Global Perspective – 10 Theses', in *Western Historical Thinking. An Intercultural Debate*, ed. by Jörn Rüsen (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), pp. 15-30.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, 'Psychological Science in a Postmodern Context', pre-publication draft for *The American Psychologist*, vol. 56, no. 10 (2001), p. [13]

<[https://www.academia.edu/24541498/Psychological\\_Science\\_in\\_a\\_Postmodern\\_Context](https://www.academia.edu/24541498/Psychological_Science_in_a_Postmodern_Context)> [accessed 15 October 2015]

<sup>5</sup> Burke's eighth thesis concerns the use of statistics in history (Burke 2002a, pp. 15-30). This thesis is of little relevance for this article because proper quantitative methods of historical research emerged in the second half of the twentieth century (although their incipient forms were present in the paradigms discussed in this work). In Peter Burke, 'Reply', in *Western Historical Thinking. An Intercultural Debate*, ed. by Jörn Rüsen (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), pp. 189-198, the author adds one more thesis, i.e. scriptocentrism. Because this thesis is of direct relevance for the history writing in the periods in question, I leave out the thesis of quantitative methods and replace it with scriptocentrism.

<sup>6</sup> Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), pp. 57. One should remember that the second half of the nineteenth century was the time of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and Marx's *Capital* (1867), which inspired historians to create works framed by either of these two progressive

grand narratives. According to Hayden White, Darwin argued for ‘the existence of real “affinities” genealogically construed. The establishment of these affinities [permitted] him to postulate the linkage of all living things to all others by the “laws” or “principles” of genealogical descent, variation, and natural selection’. Hayden White, ‘Fictions of Factual Representation’, in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 121-134 (p. 131).

<sup>7</sup> Iggers, p. 57; Alison Byerly, *Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *Toward a Philosophy of History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 165-166.

<sup>9</sup> Graves, *I, Claudius*, passim.

<sup>10</sup> Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

<sup>11</sup> Graves, *Claudius the God*, p. 9: ‘The reason I did not take the story any farther was that I wrote it less as ordinary story than as a piece of special pleading – an apology for having ever allowed myself to become the monarch of the Roman world.’

<sup>12</sup> Graves, *I, Claudius*, passim.

<sup>13</sup> Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

<sup>14</sup> Graves, *I, Claudius*, pp. 353-396, and *Claudius the God*, pp. 62-81.

<sup>15</sup> James S. Mehoke, *Robert Graves: Peace-Weaver* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), passim.

<sup>16</sup> Gergen, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen, ‘Narrative and the Self as Relationship’, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21 (1988), 17-56, (p. 39).

<sup>18</sup> Alicja Bembien, ‘Solitude as a Means of Survival’, *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 2 (2014), 24-31. Should one treat this behaviour of the protagonist as a symptom of his *idée fixe*, one may see why – with all his astuteness and knowledge – Claudius needs more than fifty years to abandon the idea of world order.

<sup>19</sup> Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 404.

<sup>22</sup> Graves, *I, Claudius*, passim, and *Claudius the God*, pp. 415-418.

<sup>23</sup> Graves, *Claudius the God*, passim.

---

<sup>24</sup> Graves's declaration that his novels were pot-boilers, intended only to pay the rent, transpires as a gesture of his downplaying the care and thought he put into these novels, perhaps because he felt he had to promote the importance of his poetry.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce E. Fleming, *Structure and Chaos in Modernist Works* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), passim.

<sup>26</sup> I refer to the concept proposed by Zygmunt Bauman in his *Liquid Modernity*. Behaviours of the sort seem to be emblematic, for example, of the contemporary golden-age yearners. See Woody Allen, dir. *Midnight in Paris* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> An individual shown that his or her worldview is untenable does not automatically have to abandon it. Psychological responses might take, in this case, various forms of negation, acceptance, etc.

<sup>28</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Ewa Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Ewa Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała*, p. 48. A humic foundation is one whose contents have been buried so they may be dug up in the future.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Arata, 'Some Versions of Form', in *A Companion to the English Novel*, ed. by Stephen Arata and others (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), pp. 192-208 (pp. 194-195).

Human beings are hard-wired to perceive pattern; the world would be unintelligible otherwise. Depending on your perspective, art is a tool either for uncovering the order inherent in human experience or for creating order where it does not exist. Or both: by means of its self-evidently artificial patterns, a work of art may heighten our awareness of the looser kinds of organization that structure the real world and our experiences in it.

---

## Missing Believed Killed? Graves and Contemporary Poetry

Sean O'Brien

My interest in Robert Graves's poetry developed quite late. When the one-volume *Collected Poems*, edited by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, appeared in 2000, as a reviewer I found its scale disproportionate to its interest, and I wanted to draw a distinction between poets like Graves, who sometime wrote great poems, and Yeats and Auden, who were great poets. Not a distinction likely to win Graves's agreement, you could say, or that of his admirers gathered at this conference.<sup>1</sup> Yet I found myself returning to some of the poems from time to time. When Michael Longley's judicious selection of Graves's work appeared in 2013, it was an opportunity to think about the work again. I hope I have come to a better understanding, late, but I hope not too late. For the poet, there is what you admire, but also what you might learn from. One of the things that strikes me is how valuable an example Graves can be for younger poets now, if they care to notice.

This conference is not the best context for my remarks, but I'm interested in three main areas: in Graves's crossings between the worlds of the living and the dead, which remain suggestive even to a reader without supernatural leanings, at a time when Dante keeps being translated, and when Rilke is also to the fore; in the formal tension of some of the poems; and in some of the love poems. These rather provisional remarks roam digressively among these matters, which I hope suggests that I'm finding my way.

Having been declared dead in *The Times* on his twenty-first birthday, Robert Graves seems to have found his survival both a torment (as memory) and a privilege (in the opportunity to rise from the graveyard of Europe and exercise his art). As he puts it in 'Haunted', 'You grin at me from daylight places, | Dead, long

dead, I'm ashamed to greet | Dead men down the public street.' In these lines the loosened sentence structure (the punctuation is mostly commas) allows the speaker himself, as well those he meets, to be dead. This grim traffic with the underworld is at once a punishment and a resource, and it recurs in several guises. There is the matter-of-fact horror of the corpse in 'A Dead Boche':

Propped against a shattered trunk  
 In a great mass of things unclean,  
 Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk  
 With clothes and face a sodden green,  
 Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,  
 Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

The thing about the dead man is that he beggars comprehension, for all the meticulous and slightly Jacobean detail of the description. He remains a presence, as though death is in some way an active condition. This vision of something being finished but not over – as Thom Gunn puts it, of being 'part still of the done war' – also crops up in the four lines of the amazing 'The Untidy Man',<sup>2</sup> where man and child are somehow present in the one person in a collapse of time on itself, and his exploded limbs have, as it were, left the nursery, which is also the battlefield and an officers' dugout, 'untidy':

There was a man, a very untidy man,  
 Whose fingers could nowhere be found to be put in his  
 tomb.  
 He had rolled his head far underneath the bed:  
 He had left his legs and arms lying all over the room.

Here the tones of a moral lesson for the young, cousin to Belloc, and perhaps to Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhymes*, and, further back, the Scissorman, are put in the service of events for which there is no precedent, and which travesty the language of

innocence. The coming and going between life and death is necessary in order for sense to be made and for horror and love to be given their due. Ghosts arising from these conditions are unlikely to wear Laura Ashley.

In Douglas Dunn's poem 'Dominies', a schoolmaster looming in the half-world of memory declares: 'I am already historical', and this seems true of Graves. Even in youth, he was to a significant degree the past. Although he supported female emancipation (as he saw it) and, when young, the Labour Party, it was remarked that Graves spoke and bore himself like someone from another age, as though marooned in the years before the Great War. His disregard (to put it mildly) for Yeats, and for Auden and many other younger poets, set him aside from some of the main currents of the inter-war years, although his influence was evident. His own diction yielded nothing to the contemporary (contrast Larkin in this regard). The sense of time he occupied in imagination was perhaps mythic rather than historical (a distinction later employed by an admirer, Ted Hughes, when writing about the Queen Mother, to whose daughter Graves said that he was honoured to receive her Gold Medal but could not accept any honour awarded by a politician). Which brings us to the myths themselves, or rather the myth, 'one story and one story only', that of the White Goddess, viewed by some as a contraption and by Alvarez, for example, as an obstruction past which real poems only emerged with difficulty.

In her essay 'Heaney and the Feminine',<sup>3</sup> Fran Brearton records that the first collection of Robert Graves's poems owned by Seamus Heaney was *Man Does. Woman Is* (1964).<sup>4</sup> The title encapsulates one of Graves's convictions and, as Brearton shows, it speaks to Heaney's characterization of masculine and feminine in his essay 'The Fire i' the Flint'.<sup>5</sup> Brearton, who is of course an admirer of Heaney's work, remarks that 'Heaney, like other male poets before him, genders the very writing of poetry in ways which, in the aftermath of second-wave feminism and deconstruction, seem now rather dated' (Brearton, p. 75).

To which Robert Graves might perhaps reply that dates have nothing to do with it, and that the conditions to which he refers are permanent and unaffected by temporary shifts in perspective and fashion, because, in the words of 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice': 'There is one story and one story only.' This is not a tenable position, but nor is Graves in a position, or inclined, to reform it. In the sex war as seen from the present, then, Graves seems to be dead, but he won't lie down. He can, at a price, be ignored or bypassed, as he bypassed modernism in favour of a vision which was prescriptive, exclusive (as modernism was) and (above all) necessary to his work (as various other modern poetic mythologies were to their authors). You might say he made a separate peace, of sorts. What the love poems offer, in part, is a remarkable diversity of dramatized situations. No, Graves is not going to present female subjectivity. How could he? But he does cover a range of human experience, with at times a stinging realism which would, at times, make talk of the Goddess as disguise misplaced.

Heaney was no fool, and neither are Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, who also greatly admired Graves from their student days. Longley in particular shows a fascinating development as a love poet from a kind of gilded formalism to a more intimate idiom. The slightly younger David Constantine writes of Graves:

I first read Graves, his poetry and *The White Goddess*, when I was sixteen or seventeen. Later I went to the lectures he gave as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. I owe him a great deal, but the debt can perhaps be summarised thus: he taught me that the language of poetry must be at least as rigorous as good prose; and he confirmed me in my own – my own kind of – devotion to the Muse.<sup>6</sup>

And in the generations before theirs, admiration for Graves's work had crossed divisions which may now appear decisive. Adopted by the 1940s poets whom the Movement derided, he also

---

received fan-mail from Kingsley Amis and the admiration of Auden's contemporary, William Empson. Graves, we suppose, must have been on to something to appeal so broadly. One of his sternest later detractors, Donald Davie, seems to owe the tidal aria of one of his own best poems, 'Time Passing, Beloved', to Graves's 'Counting the Beats'. There is something of the king-over-the-water about Graves, choosing to live [here] in Mallorca, not, it seems, with an exile's melancholy but with a sense of access to a further, more authoritative dimension of the imagination, as well as an inescapable vocation to suffer, worship and illuminate in a setting where the goddess made her presence felt, to bear witness to the cycles of a myth.

Yet I don't have quite the sense that Graves's work has the same degree of audibility and presence to younger poets at present as it did to many of their predecessors, though I'm happy to be shown otherwise. And I wonder what there is in Graves's poetry and in his thinking about poetry that might be commended to the current generation of poets, many of whom seem to be caught in the feedback loop of the New York School.

This comparative neglect, if that's what it is, is partly a matter of fashion, partly of inevitable biographical happenstance. As we know, with some exceptions, poets' reputations and readerships tend to shrink in the periods following their deaths. Yeats, Eliot and Larkin are evidently such exceptions, but Lowell and Berryman seem somehow to be held in lower regard, as do Gunn and even, marginally, Ted Hughes. We can of course make distinctions between the core readership of critics, scholars, serious devotees, and other poets, and the larger public further from the centre of activity. There the general esteem in which poetry is held in the Anglophone world seems to continue in gradual decline. When, for example, Auden's centenary came up in 2007, it was clear that he was a less than familiar figure to people of whom more might have been expected. For them Auden was a remote and neglected writer who might benefit from their temporary curiosity. Nowadays, it seems, there are no posthumous

contemporaries except Sylvia Plath. And by and large in the popular imagination Graves is the author of *I, Claudius*, and perhaps ‘Welsh Incident’ and ‘The Persian Version’.

Graves, knowing how the times would answer, once wondered what was wrong with the idea of a canon of two or three hundred books which educated people could be expected to have read. What would he make of universities where some teachers of literature have no interest in poetry and feel no shame about it? And where close textual reading is becoming a rarity, a condition left to the poets who teach Creative Writing to mitigate? Graves might well have taken a dim view of the institutional teaching of writing, though he did once in a time of particular indigence express a willingness to teach poetry to old ladies, provided he was paid to do so. As a teacher of Creative Writing I think that we underestimate old ladies at our peril. At the same time I worry that even gifted students have less sense than before of the traditions to which their own work is related.

Looking for what it is that leaves Graves slightly to one side (though in a sense he always wanted to be there), one thing slightly less in evidence in contemporary poetry is the mythopoeic character of much twentieth century work – for instance, Pound, Eliot, Yeats, David Jones, Graves, Auden, Hughes, Hill, Heaney – though there are signs of it in Toby Martinez de las Rivas’s first collection, *Terror*. The idea that poetry makes or discovers order seems to have a more limited and local application now. Things have perhaps actually fallen apart, leaving an acceptance of the fact that a totalizing vision, a unified imaginative field, is no longer, or at least rarely, a prospect: at least until someone comes along and proves otherwise, which with luck could be any day. This is not necessarily a matter of writing epics, but rather of a unifying ground of creation, an integrity which Graves saw extending to the poet’s sense of his relationship with society, which had to be one of watchful independence. At the same time as obeying the dictates of his own myth, Graves insisted that poems were to be understood, that they should make sense, not in

the banal way that might comfort Jeremy Paxman, but as the outcome of their art. In his poem 'The Makers', the sometimes rather Gravesian Howard Nemerov evoked pre-Orphic poets, whose priorities remain in force:<sup>7</sup>

They were the first great listeners, attuned  
To interval, relationship, and scale,  
The first to say above, beneath, beyond,  
Conjurors with love, death, sleep, with bread and wine.

Sense, then, is musical sense. Such a conception of poetry doesn't sit easily with the commissions, competitions, prizes and other forms of patronage which occupy a great deal of the public sphere of poetry nowadays, when older poets, themselves the beneficiaries of some of this, watch at times with a mixture of disquiet and irritation the anxious scrambling of their younger counterparts to be professionalized, often long before professionalism is evident in their work. Nemerov again, with a damning quatrain called 'On Being a Member of the Jury for a Poetry Prize':

*Jury's* the *mot juste* under our ground rules:  
I may say Guilty, and I mostly do,  
But sentencing's beyond me, poeticules,  
As, by your poems, it's beyond most of you.

The only way out of this cul-de-sac is with the words on the page, the poem written since it demands to be written and to achieve form, with a very occasional reward, in Graves's words, in 'the sense that what [the poet] has written not only stands on all four feet, but has sufficient animation to walk away by itself, and perhaps go on walking long years after his death'.<sup>8</sup> As Paul O'Prey remarks in his introduction to Graves's *Collected Writings on Poetry*:

The majority of Graves's criticism is predominantly concerned with three fundamental issues: the nature and process of poetic 'inspiration'; the social and moral purposes of poetry, and the poet's role in society; the professional standards of modern poets. Graves invariably writes from the point of view of a practising poet rather than that of an academic critic.<sup>9</sup>

That's putting it mildly. Graves himself wrote that: 'in the Foreword to *On English Poetry* I describe my work as no more than "an irregular approach to the problem of the nature of poetic art: workshop notes."' <sup>10</sup> Time and again Graves shows poetry as a practical activity, a task. One such 'workshop note' states that 'rhyme must come unexpectedly and yet inevitably, like presents at Christmas, and convey the comforting sense of free-will within predestination' <sup>11</sup> This is surely true, and in its domestication of large matters sounds rather like Auden; or rather, of course, Auden sounds like this, being another resident of the haunted house of comfortable [Englishness] fixed to the earth by ritual. Graves was to arrive at his own 'system' in the form of his mythology: why should he need another, an equivalent of the various literary-critical ideologies that have risen and fallen since the 1930s? O'Prey calls the matters concerning Graves as a critic fundamental, and indeed they are, and yet questions of inspiration, poetry's social and moral function, and the poet's role are not by and large matters on which most younger contemporary poets speak with confidence or authority.

As to the practical character of writing poems, W. F. Bateson, in the 1972 'Epilogue' to his book *English Poetry and the English Language*, turns from admiration of Auden's own 'Epilogue' to *The Orators* (calling 'the gap is the grave where the tall return' 'one of the best lines in the English language', which might be stretching a point) to Graves's own 'On Portents'. <sup>12</sup> Here follows a brief digression: this is probably not an original observation, but as we know, Graves metaphorically rose from the grave, and was

tall, and returned from the battlefield to live almost a further Biblical span; and this eerie coincidence (if that's what it is) in Bateson's essay provides an inkling of the elements of a potential poem – words, overtones, chance resemblances on the brink of seeming 'meant', seeming 'necessary', revealing a kind of sense-music – as they approach the point of coalescence. For the reader this gives a practical sense of the moment before creation, of what Graves himself seems to have in mind when he describes the trance-state of composition, which is not all that different from Coleridge's sense of the imagination capable of forming new wholes. The example Bateson chooses to discuss, 'On Portents', is, of course, a finished piece, which, like Auden's line from 'Oh where are you going', is concerned with prophecy:

If strange things happen where she is,  
 So that men say 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.

Laura Riding appears to have thought that time stopped. Perhaps it did when she was around. If, as seems likely, Riding is the 'She' of this poem, she also has the power to alter the usual order of events. But for my purpose this is not the most pressing feature of the poem. More interesting is the fact that it reads as a *dramatic* poem, as though it might have been excerpted from a play: being an account offered by a witness and explainer, with Shakespearean overtones (of the 'sheeted dead' in the streets of *Julius Caesar*, and perhaps of Ulysses's address to Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*). This accounts for what at first seems like the flatness of the close, where the strange events are accounted for but not then recomposed as 'a conclusion' of an epigrammatic

---

or epiphanic kind struggled for in a great many contemporary poems. In fact, by then the speaker has done his work, and in any case the poem's power lies not so much in ostensible content as in the relationship of rhythm and metre running under the sobriety of the utterance. (How often Graves treats the materials of passion with sobriety.) Graves wrote that 'the rhythmic part of poetry consists in emotional variations on a given metrical norm',<sup>13</sup> which is fair enough, but as Bateson demonstrates, the variations are resolved, or composed, into a larger unity. Bateson writes:

Apparently the poem is in blank verse: five of the eight lines are decasyllables. And as none of the lines is indented we naturally – and surely rightly – take them all to be metrically equivalent. But this cannot be done by counting syllables: three of the lines are only octosyllabic. What the reader finds himself doing is adjusting all eight lines so that they can be read with the same total stress-weight. To scan the poem we have therefore to adopt the four degrees of stress recommended by some modern philologists - and when this is done, a much more sophisticated poem emerges (p. 103).

Bateson then prints the poem with the degrees of stress marked. By his reading, the accumulated stress-weight of each line is twenty-four. Interesting. Perhaps we don't want a poem which can be converted into an arithmetical answer, but his approach does demonstrate unity-within-variety. Some would prefer to note that each line has (arguably) four main stresses. (Michael Donaghy, who has been coming to mind all the time I've been thinking about this lecture, remarked that he was more interested in stresses than syllable-counting.) In Graves's poem there is a quiet but marked tension between the ordered clarity of the utterance, which occupies a single sentence, and the organization of sound.

Bateson traces this in detail, but what even his meticulous account cannot do is recreate the experience of reading and hearing the poem. The best image for this I've come across (here

is another digression) is in Neil Ascherson's book *Black Sea*, where he describes the observations made in the Bosphorus in 1680 by Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli, which bore out the description by Apollonius of Rhodes in *The Voyage of the Argonauts*.<sup>14</sup> Marsigli confirmed that whilst it was true that the Black Sea emptied into the Bosphorus, there was also a deeper, more saline current running from the Aegean (and thus the Mediterranean) into the Black Sea. Opposed yet complimentary, mutually dependent. On a thematic note, in a digression-within-digression, and at the risk of sailing into a zone of poetic associations which might exasperate the critic, the reader will also be struck by what Ascherson goes on to say about the Black Sea itself, that it was traditionally observed to be teeming with life and yet is also, below a depth of 100 metres, dead, and that what killed its vast lower depths was a surplus of organic materials entering the Black Sea from the river systems which empty into it the Dnieper, the Dniester, the Don and the Danube. The living and the dead are simultaneously present, in fact as well as metaphor.

### **To Bring the Dead to Life**

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

Let his forgotten griefs be now,  
 And now his withered hopes;  
 Subdue your pen to his handwriting  
 Until it prove as natural  
 To sign his name as yours.

Limp as he limped,  
 Swear by the oaths he swore;

If he wore black, affect the same;  
If he had gouty fingers,  
Be yours gouty too.

Assemble tokens intimate of him --  
A ring, a hood, a desk:  
Around these elements then build  
A home familiar to  
The greedy revenant.

So grant him life, but reckon  
That the grave which housed him  
May not be empty now:  
You in his spotted garments  
Shall yourself lie wrapped.

One can imagine a kind of non-official funeral at which this poem might form the words of the service, affirming in another form of words that 'in the midst of life we are in death'. The friction in this poem, the dialectic, is between the terror that should accompany necromancy and the actual matter-of-factness of its handling. In one sense this is a ghost story, with a comeuppance for the curious intruder, 'you'. But there is a larger 'reveal' in the time-structure of the closing stanza, with its implication that that its sombre promise has already been fulfilled. Of course, the origins of this ambiguous occupation of the world and the grave can be sought in Graves's experience, and he insisted that poetry should be read in this way asking, 'who has ever successfully disguised his character in what he wrote?' For poets working now there is interest in the 'tough reasonableness' of the voice as it deals with a kind of metaphysics that doesn't necessarily require assent to the supernatural. There is also the whole matter of the poem's address, which operates in a sort of mild imperative and is aimed at 'you', the democratic 'one'. The poem offers in part an ironic instruction to the novice, but the

‘you’ is also a means of self-address, and this makes the poem a rehearsal of something long known, where the speaker paces a cell with no exit or date of release. It’s not a ghost story, then, or not only a ghost story: it’s a horror story about consciousness: one that seems to have been admiringly burlesqued in Thom Gunn’s ‘In the Tank’:

The jail contained a tank, the tank contained  
A box, a mere suspension at the centre,  
Where there was nothing left to understand,  
And where he must re-enter and re-enter.

I seem to remember first reading this in Gunn’s collection *Touch* in the late 1960s with a sense of what might be called despondent triumph at the poem’s perfectly engineered negation. And seemed it must be true: the poem’s form made it so. Looking back from Gunn’s poem at Graves’s involves a reminder that form itself can be a mode of intelligence, and not only the embodiment of an attitude but a form of prophecy. The poet and critic John Holloway wrote: ‘the imaginativeness and strangeness of Robert Graves [were] largely ignored by the Movement: ‘what has been learnt from him is a less remarkable but less tricky quality, his dry, depreciatory, yet often tolerant tone’.<sup>15</sup> If this is so, the separation seems needless, and the poet now at work could do worse than try to re-unify these parts of the poetic whole.

### **The Cool Web**

Children are dumb to say how hot the day is,  
How hot the scent is of the summer rose,  
How dreadful the black wastes of evening sky,  
How dreadful the tall soldiers drumming by,  
But we have speech, to chill the angry day,  
And speech, to dull the rose's cruel scent,

We spell away the overhanging night,  
We spell away the soldiers and the fright.  
There's a cool web of language winds us in,  
Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:  
We grow sea-green at last and coldly die  
In brininess and volubility.  
But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,  
Throwing off language and its watery clasp  
Before our death, instead of when death comes,  
Facing the wide glare of the children's day,  
Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,  
We shall go mad, no doubt, and die that way.

This would suggest that, as the song 'Love and Marriage' puts it, you can't fruitfully have the one (the controlled tone) without the other (the imaginativeness and strangeness). Where does 'The Cool Web' happen? In at least two places which occupy the same site: partly in the permanent present of poetic attention, partly in a half-ballad territory which neighbours Hardy's, Housman's and De La Mare's, one where concreteness is not the uppermost concern, where love and death are swiftly evoked. The alternatives it sets out are either an acceptance of the 'watery clasp' of a presumably protean language, which leads, perhaps, to an excessive orthodoxy, an ultramontane fidelity, and to sterility and exhaustion; or else an adult exposure to the maddening glut of experience without a child's capacity to learn a way out of it; followed by death. The dryness Holloway spoke of is clearly present in the understatement of the conclusion: you die of exhaustion or you die by being overwhelmed, and it is not clear that either is actually to be preferred, while in any case choice doesn't seem to be at issue, for these are experiences in which, as in the case of rhyme, the sense of free will is only a manifestation of predestination. As Peter Porter put it, 'The cost of seriousness is death.' Graves's clear-eyed pessimism needs, of course, to be seen in the context of a very high estimation he placed on

imagination and language, whatever their human cost. The corrosive knowingness which follows the collapse of such standards, which can be encountered every day in a cultural sphere dominated by trivia, would surely have confirmed both his pessimism and his resoluteness.

As the subject turns to love, the resoluteness is, thankfully, at times revealed to be continuous with a sense of humour, for example about being too old for all this, as in 'The Face in the Mirror', with its accumulation of three-syllable weak-ending rhymes wearily declaring the flesh's willingness. Graves the love poet has a good deal of variety within the theme. 'We add might the chilling 'With Her Lips Only', and 'The Green-Sailed Vessel.' Or there is (in the poem's own words) the 'dirty, sly' 'A Slice of Wedding-Cake', approvingly quoted by Larkin, who finds it 'engaging', where the martyrdom of 'lovely, gifted girls' to 'impossible men' may not be all it seems. 'A Slice of Wedding-Cake' could have appeared in *New Lines* and is traceable in a debased form, and perhaps at a slightly less exalted level of society, in Larkin's 'Self's the Man'. Larkin, who wrote that Graves's Clark Lectures evoked 'a thrilling sense of vocation', also found Graves to be about the best example available to younger poets in a review written in 1958, but his feelings about Graves were always mixed, and in the same piece he also expressed a famous reservation about the quality of Graves's work; it's one which also seems to frame a reservation, as if in a distorting mirror, about his own:

It is ironic that Graves, whose view of poetry causes him to speak of 'a poem which is moon-magical enough to walk off the page – if you know what I mean – and to keep on walking, and to get under people's skins and into their eyes and hearts and heart and marrows' should appear incapable of writing that kind of poem himself.<sup>16</sup>

Really? I think more than a few people would disagree with Larkin's assessment. Larkin's view, it might be inferred, reflects an anxiety not to overrate poetry itself, rather than Graves; half a century on, we can see where under-rating it had/s got us, but we can balance that with the stimulus Graves offers.

**Sean O'Brien** is a distinguished poet, critic and playwright.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> [Editor's note: The conference referred to is the Twelfth International Robert Graves Conference, 'Robert Graves: Humour, Irony, Tragedy, and the Grotesque, 8-12 July 2014, in Palma and Deyá, Mallorca.]

<sup>2</sup> [Editor's note: this poem is one of Graves's uncollected poems published in Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999). Untitled, the poem's title was supplied by the editors.]

<sup>3</sup> Fran Brearton, 'Heaney an the Feminine', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 73-91.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Graves, *Man Does, Woman Is* (London: Cassell, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Fire I' the Flint', in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Volume 60 (20 April 2016)

<<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/proceedings-british-academy-volume-60-fire-i%E2%80%99-flint-reflections-poetry-gerard-manley>> [Accessed 24 April 2020]

<sup>6</sup> David Constantine, "'A grace it had, devouring": Apparitions of Beauty, Love and Terror in the Poetry of Robert Graves', *Gravesiana*, 3 (2012), 150-167 (p. 150).

<sup>7</sup> [Editor's note: Howard Nemerov wrote a very favourable review of one of Graves's 1955 *Collected Poems* in *The Kenyon Review*, 18, (Winter, 1956), pp. 131-136.]

<sup>8</sup> Robert Graves, *The Crowning Privilege: The Clark Lectures 1954-1955*; also, *Various Essays on Poetry and Sixteen New Poems* (London: Cassell, 1955), p. 19.

---

<sup>9</sup> Robert Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. ix.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Graves, *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922-1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. vii.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Graves, 'Observations on Poetry', in *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922-1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), pp. 1-26 (p. 5).

<sup>12</sup> W. F. Bateson, *English Poetry and the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.102.

<sup>13</sup> 'Observations', p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> John Holloway, *The Colours of Clarity: Essays on Contemporary Literature and Education* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1964), p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Larkin, Review of *Steps*, *Manchester Guardian*, 19 December 1958, in Larkin, *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London, Faber and Faber 2001), p. 183.



---

## Further into the Labyrinth: Letters between Robert Graves and Basil Liddell-Hart in the 1930s

*Joseph Bailey*

The death of the military hero of the 1914-18 War T. E. Lawrence in May 1935 from a motor cycle accident began a series of letters between Robert Graves, who had written about Lawrence in his 1927 book *Lawrence and the Arabs*,<sup>1</sup> and Basil Liddell-Hart, the military historian and strategist who had also written about the same man. Richard Percival Graves tells how after the accident and while Lawrence was critically ill, Graves was approached by a news agency in London to write an article on Lawrence, which he wrote overnight, basing much of it on a letter he had received from Lawrence in February 1935.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent article, published under the strikingly misleading title, ‘Myself – by Lawrence: How this Document was Written’, appeared on first column of the front page of the *London Evening Standard* and was sold to several other newspapers in England and the US making Graves nearly £200.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Graves had used quotations from Lawrence’s letter without clearing copyright with the estate and as R. P. Graves remarks, it was some time before he was able to settle the consequent dispute with them. Graves’s *Evening Standard* article immediately led to an exchange of letters with Liddell-Hart, who had also written about Lawrence and to an eventual collaboration between the two authors.

In this essay I want to discuss the problems Graves encountered in writing about Lawrence and in particular obtaining permission to publish Lawrence’s letters from the Trustees of the Lawrence Estate. I will show how Graves and Liddell-Hart communicated with each other after their friend’s death and subsequently battled

with literary agents and executors to wrest the content of letters they had written and received into the public domain to complete their unique double portraits of the man they knew. And since every labyrinth should have a minotaur, one will emerge towards the end of the story.

Graves had come to the attention of the Lawrence family after writing the *Evening Standard* article. Lawrence's brother Arnold ('Arnie') and other members of the family objected to the sensational nature of Graves's and the newspaper's coverage of the manner of Lawrence's death. News of their displeasure had filtered back to Graves who had been living in Mallorca. In his own defence, Graves took the robust view that the Lawrence family had been egged-on by society figures who had befriended them in their time of grief and had encouraged them to think that he was not a suitable person to write any future biographies of their relative. Liddell-Hart, in response to a quotation from an unnamed writer as 'having no critical service in my regard' wrote Graves a 'friendly note' asking if it was his name that had been deleted from the quotation'.<sup>4</sup>

Miranda Seymour says Liddell-Hart's note had the desired effect of cornering Graves and extracting an admission from him that this was so and that he had included the quotation without attribution to make himself sound superior. She relates that Graves was mortified to learn in a subsequent letter that Lawrence had spoken in equally disparaging terms about him to Liddell-Hart, and that Liddell-Hart had been recommended by Lawrence to Alexander Korda as a potential screenplay writer. While neither showed much concern when they learned that Arnie wanted to use Siegfried Sassoon as a screenwriter for a film that was planned about the life of Lawrence, Seymour remarks that Graves's only comment was that this was the Lawrence Estate's funeral not theirs. It seems that the two men had come to an early understanding about their subject and his circle.

Never one to shirk a challenge, Graves contacted Liddell-Hart again with a view to writing a biography of Lawrence and they

soon agreed to write joint biographies of Lawrence – ‘T.E’ as they called him. In December 1935 Liddell-Hart wrote an eighteen-point letter on Lawrence’s reasons for concealing facts. ‘Often I am extremely doubtful what his real reasons were and at other times the apparent reasons were not reasonable’, he remarks with asperity.<sup>5</sup>

In early February 1936, Graves gave his opinion on a suggestion made by Liddell-Hart that the joint book be called ‘Sides and Asides’. He says that this ‘title [has a] too popular ring, like a book about an actor–manager’, suggesting that he would prefer ‘Journey Through Lawrence-Land with Gun and Camera’, and then admits he is joking.<sup>6</sup>

But by the end of March, Liddell-Hart had written to warn Graves about a ‘cryptic’ note he had received from the publisher Jonathan Cape to say that Raymond Savage, acting as agent for the Trustees of the Lawrence Estate, claimed there would be difficulties over the use of Lawrence’s letters.<sup>7</sup> He mentions that he had received a phone call from Arnie to say the Trustees had wanted to give a definite negative (to the use of the letters), but they were now considering some sort of compromise. He adds that he had been informed they should hear from T. S. Eliot in due course (though what Eliot’s role might be is never discussed). And he concludes that the Trustees’ original negativity can be attributed to the explanatory comments that he and Graves had made in their initial writings about Lawrence.

Graves’s reply of 5 April 1936 is blunter. Noting that the proposed American publisher Doubleday had made an offer that was ‘all right, the royalty is what matters most and that is very good, I thought. [...] Another thing is, what exactly are [sic] Doubleday going to get for its money?’ Graves goes on to assert, ‘It’s that snake Savage at the bottom of all this, I believe as the Committee like all committees has a standard of gentlemaness [sic] before it – as it is the H(ighest) C(ommon) F(actor) of the comprising members’.<sup>8</sup>

And in an extraordinary sentence Graves asserts, 'a committee is extended behind itself and unless one of us had been present at this deliberation and introduced a personal rather than a general point of view this was more or less what was bound to happen'. He continues to say, 'the fact is that the committee is more or less passive but can have its gentlemanly service made use of by an active voice such as Savage' who, he claims, is 'jealous of Watt [their literary agent]. Depend on it – Savage is our active adversary'. Graves concludes the letter by imagining a conversation between himself and Savage in Mallorca where, over a coffee, he asks Savage directly to name his price.

At the end of April, Graves writes asking if there is any news about the book from the committee and reports on the peaceful situation in Mallorca, contrasting it with 'the usual European gloom' reported by the newspapers. 'Patience, what can we do about it?', as they say here'.<sup>9</sup>

Liddell-Hart takes control of the situation in his reply, admitting that while he has not yet had time to clarify his reactions, he proposes an alternative to swallowing the conditions by (a) tackling the Trustees personally and severally (b) to publish their material minus the letters if the publisher will take it in this curtailed form, while at the same time withholding their own letters from the proposed publication of Lawrence's collected letters by the Trustees. If they were to decide on (b) it would confront the Trustees with their resolve, pointing out the defects of the Trustees' position and could produce a modification of attitude. He ends by agreeing that he can see the hand of Savage and the 'rather legalistic mind' of Eliot in the conditions as presently framed.<sup>10</sup>

By 7 May, Graves begins by saying he admires the restraint of Liddell-Hart's last letter. His own feelings are less manageable: 'Arnie has no right to let us get on with the job and then get behind a committee'.<sup>11</sup> He thinks it is useless to tackle the Trustees severally; to publish the material minus the letters would make for a poor book and the Trustees would not let them publish

that much without a lien on the letters. He calls the Trustees' suggestions 'insulting', particularly their request to see Graves's letters: 'I should not in any case consent to giving the Trustees [my] original letters because they contain references to people who I respect that I don't propose to broadcast. Delay would also doom the book. 'The book would be born dead if published a year after this'. There is fact, he concludes, 'deadlock'.

He goes on to make suggestions as to what Liddell-Hart could do and offers what he wants to do. He believes they should agree to pirated editions of the book in the US – where the copyright laws were very different to those in the UK and Europe. He recommends the use of a copyright expert, a barrister Bill (W. A.) Fuller at a chambers in Middle Temple in London, who can be used to solve any problems they might encounter because 'he works for the Society of Authors and know everything there is to be known'. There is an emotional side to these suggestions. Graves wants to publish the book in its present form in the US, 'just to put on record that [he] is not accustomed to being tricked and stamped on'. And while he knows he is not in any position to anticipate Liddell-Hart's feelings on the matter, he cautiously concludes, 'You ought not care to be involved in any such business even if you were quite sure you were safe from legal action'.

Liddell-Hart replies on the 21 May 1936, apologising for the delay in his writing. He points out that there are some ambiguities in Savage's letter on behalf of the Trustees about whether the Trustees intend to stop them from quoting from all of Lawrence's letters or only the parts where he refers to him or Graves.<sup>12</sup> In another aside, Liddell-Hart seems to find a certain humour in Savage's talk of the 'decision of the Trustees', for he understood that there has never been a meeting of them. He claims that one of the Trustees, Alan Dawnay, a retired army colonel who had known Lawrence in the Great War, had never been consulted since he was appointed, and others have not been either, and as 'you suggest the Trustees are merely being used as a convenient

screen for sidestepping'. Liddell-Hart concludes, 'That the real source of the decision is Savage influencing Arnie, and with some contribution perhaps from Eliot's legal mind'.

And Liddell-Hart is perhaps getting to the crux of the matter when he considers why the Committee of the Trustees had raised an objection to Graves's part in the proposed biography and reveals that his own involvement may have influenced Savage against them both. As his former literary agent, Savage had deceived him over an abortive film about Lawrence, Liddell-Hart claims. And knowing that Savage was aware of it, and aware, too, that he was unlikely to get any of Liddell-Hart's work again, it 'would only be in accord with human nature' that Savage was inclined 'to put the spoke in because of the business aspect'.

In an interesting second part of this letter sent to Arnie through A. Watt, Liddell-Hart says he sees no 'true value in' in any attempts that merely embalm a memory. 'The best way to serve a memory is to make it a living thing and not a dead one. To give people as true a picture of [Lawrence] as possible and to use his own words as a better guide to him [than] any interpretation of him by another can be'. He adds that since he had seen Graves's material he had 'come to realise more fully the value of publishing the two lots of data in conjunction, as a check on each other as well as a supplement to each other'. He declares any money he might make in writing his side of the biography would go towards the type 'of research that Lawrence suggested'. He concludes sympathetically by stating that Graves has always regarded writing novels as a means of generating money to give him time to do what he [Graves] regards as his 'real work, poetry', adding that he knew Lawrence regarded it one of his duties to enable Graves to do his 'unprofitable but worthy work'.<sup>13</sup>

On the 26 May, Liddell-Hart wrote to Colonel Dawnay offering the Trustees a copy of what he and Graves had written so far to decide whether to allow them to use the resource of Lawrence's letters for their book. Ultimately, he said, the decision would have to be taken in conjunction with Jonathan Cape the publisher

whose opinion would be sought on whether their book would jeopardise the sales of the soon-to-be-published official edition of Lawrence's collected letters. Cape, he concludes, is the best judge of this question, because he is the proposed publisher of both books and is far too shrewd a businessman to endanger his big profit for the sake of a small one.<sup>14</sup>

Graves's response is more succinct. He sends a telegram on the 31 May saying: LIMITED EDITION. MY ONLY HONOURABLE ALTERNATIVE ROBERT.<sup>15</sup>

Liddell-Hart replied in early June to say that Graves's telegram did not disappoint but that he was somewhat puzzled by it – as well he might have been – and so awaits a letter presumably for further clarification. He is still unclear about the reasoning by which Graves had reached his decision that the only alternative had been reached. And he then sets out what his attitude would be to small and large omissions from the letters.<sup>16</sup>

Graves answered the next day, 4 June, reflecting on the supposed objections raised by the Trustees 'or' as he says 'friends of the Trustees'.<sup>17</sup> He regards these as 'only a smokescreen for their real objection which is an "emotional objection" to his obituary in the *Evening Standard*, which had led them to impose 'crippling penalties' to discourage him. He agrees, however, with Liddell-Hart that small omissions can be tolerated for the sake of reasonableness.

Whatever the thoughts of the two men at this time about the whole enterprise they must have been relieved by Cape's verdict, conveyed in a letter to Watt, composed on the same day. Cape proposed going ahead with a limited edition, which would make it more sought after and would not compete with any collected edition of the Lawrence letters which the Trustees may have in mind.<sup>18</sup>

Terms the Trustees quoted in a letter via A. P. Watt to Graves abruptly brought the two authors back to earth.<sup>19</sup> Graves enthusiastically annotated his copy of the letter in reply to Liddell-Hart on 11 August, in which he also describes returning to

Waterloo station in an empty railway carriage after his evacuation from Mallorca, along with his companion Laura Riding.<sup>20</sup> Writing c/o his publishers Constable in London he tells of 'being taken off the island and to Valencia by the arrival a British destroyer and travel by third Class railway carriage for six days to get to London and now being 'a refugee and without money'.<sup>21</sup> Again in another annotation to this letter Graves says he believes Riding 'very much wants to see [you]'. Liddell-Hart received an undated letter from Riding from their temporary address at 25 Marlborough House Osnaburgh Street NW1 extending an invitation to meet: 'will you have lunch with us or something?', she asks, in the spirit of sweetness and light.<sup>22</sup>

But Savage was not through with them. As promised earlier, the minotaur (or, as Graves knew him, the snake) finally emerged from his lair in September 1936. Graves received a scorching letter from him as agent for the Trustees concerning the legal rather than the moral implications that Graves had outlined to him (in a letter that is so mild I have not included it here). In his response, dated 3 September 1936, Savage acknowledges Graves's letter of 29 August, and explains that as the representative of the Executors of the T. E. Lawrence Estate, his loyalty is due to them. He then characterizes Graves's requests for a personal explanation of his advice to them as 'impudent' and declines 'in any way' to discuss the affairs of his clients. Warming to his subject, he adds, 'I note, however, with not the slightest degree of surprise, the veiled insinuations in your letter and I am gratified that you have put your intentions in writing. I am not Mr [E. M.] Forster's agent and I have no interest in his affairs and the issue is, up to a point, between you and him.'<sup>23</sup> Forster had been asked to oversee the collecting of Lawrence's letters with a view to publication by the Trustees but had declined due to health reasons.

Savage then concludes his letter in a remarkably contumelious tone, apparently pricked by a comment Graves made regarding his hostility. 'With regards to your postscript, I wish to assure that

there has never been any personal “hostility” towards you on my part. I think you flatter yourself unduly to suggest that I have sufficiently thought of you to ever consider being “hostile” to you’.

Along with this letter, Savage enclosed a second letter he’d written to Graves earlier, on 27 August, but had not sent. Perhaps he had thought better of it. Making comments concerning Forster he would repeat only a week later, Savage writes:

As however, you have chosen to write such a ridiculously pompous letter and you have asked me my personal feelings. I will give it to you but emphasise the fact in no way whatsoever does my private opinion reflect that either of the Trustees or the late T. E. [Lawrence] family. First of all I would only say that I had no desire whatsoever to get in touch with you personally. Secondly, that your claim that we were friends in 1927 is untrue. Thirdly, if I really let myself go I might overstep the mark. The appearance of the article on the *Evening Standard* about T. E.’s [death] may be sufficient guide to you as to my feelings.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly Graves had trod on the tail of the minotaur too hard and this was meant as his comeuppance. If Graves troubled to reply to such a badly-conceived letter no evidence has survived. Perhaps the existence of the dual biography, published in 1938 in an edition of 1,000 copies (500 in England, 500 in the US), including copies of Lawrence’s letters, suggests Graves chose to be politic.<sup>25</sup>

In a letter Graves wrote to Kathleen, Liddell-Hart’s widow, after his death, dated 2 February 1970, Graves says ‘we never had the least argument while we were working on the Lawrence book did we? Or on any other occasion [he] THOUGHT’ (emphasis in the original).<sup>26</sup> In a marginal note, Beryl Graves wrote: ‘RG’s memory failing!!’

Now old soldiers may forget, but on reflection, and having read over this correspondence in its entirety, I am in agreement with

Graves. There does not seem to have been any real arguments between the two authors – their disagreements were at most a difference of strategies to reach a common goal.

*The writer acknowledges the work and helpful advice of the staff at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at Kings College, University of London.*

**Joseph Bailey** is an independent scholar and frequent contributor to *Gravesiana*.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, *Lawrence and the Arabs* (London: Cape, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura 1926-40* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 1990), p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves, 'Myself – by Lawrence: How this Document was Written', *Evening Standard (London)*, 20 May 1935, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York Henry Holt, 1995), pp. 232-33.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Liddell-Hart to Robert Graves, 24 December 1935, Liddell-Hart Library, Kings College, University of London, LH 9/13/14. (All correspondence cited here will be found in LH/9/13/14.)

<sup>6</sup> RG to LH, 2 February 1935.

<sup>7</sup> LH to RG, 31 March 1936.

<sup>8</sup> RG to LH, 5 April 1936.

<sup>9</sup> RG to LH, 23 April 1936.

<sup>10</sup> LH to RG 5 May 1936.

<sup>11</sup> RH to LH 7 May 1936.

<sup>12</sup> LH to RG 2 May 1936 part 1.

<sup>13</sup> Liddell-Hart to A. Lawrence, 21 May 1936. part 2.

<sup>14</sup> LH to Col Alan Dawnay, 26 May 1936 part 2.

<sup>15</sup> Telegram from RG to LH, 31 May 1936 part 2.

<sup>16</sup> LH to RG 3 June 1936, LH 9/13/14, Part 3.

<sup>17</sup> RG to LH 4 June 1936, LH 9/13/14, Part 3.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Cape to A.W. Watt, 4 June 1936.

- 
- <sup>19</sup> Raymond Savage to A. P. Watt, 7 August 1936.
- <sup>20</sup> A. P. Watt to RG, 11 August 1936 (copy).
- <sup>21</sup> RG to LH, 8 August 1936.
- <sup>22</sup> Laura Riding to LH, undated.
- <sup>23</sup> Raymond Savage to RG (via Constable), 3 September 1936.
- <sup>24</sup> Raymond Savage to RG, 27 August 1936 (copy).
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Graves and Basil Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence to His Biographer* (New York: Doubleday, 1938).
- <sup>26</sup> RG to Kathleen Liddell-Hart, 2 February 1970, annotated.



## **‘If “Princess Europa” returned to her namesake today’: Robert Graves and Europa<sup>1</sup>**

*Nancy Rosenfeld*

As noted in the Call for Papers, the Fourteenth International Robert Graves Society Conference (Palma and Deyá, Mallorca, 10-14 July 2018) ‘will explore any aspect of Graves and Europe, from his own life and work in Mallorca, to the relevance of his writing for [the] European present and future’. For Robert Graves the commonly-accepted separation between history, ethnography, mythology, the plastic arts, literature, and even governance and economics, was arguably less meaningful than modern academe’s traditional division into disciplines would usually have it. In this paper I examine Graves’s published references to Europa in *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess* as possible sites of Gravesean insights into the geographical-historical Europe in which he spent most of his life. I will also touch on ‘Hymn to Europa’, c. 150 BCE, an epyllion composed in Greek by the Alexandrian poet Moschus,<sup>2</sup> with which Graves was surely familiar in the original Greek, and suggest that a Gravesean muse, such as the ‘woman of true royalty’ from his poem ‘The Secret Land’ is indeed a sister of Princess Europa:

I never dared question my love  
About the government of her queendom  
Or its geography.<sup>3</sup>

This paper concludes with a look at Graves’s poem, ‘General Bloodstock’s Lament for England.’ Whether or not his insights are of use to those struggling with the meaning and ramifications of the United Kingdom’s decision to secede from the European

Union – the Brexit – is beyond the scope of this paper, but I venture to hope that Graves’s discussions of the etymology and mythological sources of Europe / Europa will be of interest.

## The Word

As one for whom words and their power were of overriding importance, Robert Graves would probably have agreed that this examination of Europe / Europa should begin with the etymology of Europe, before moving on to a view of the word as the name of a mythological personage and then of a continent. The ancient Greek word *europa* contains the elements *eurus*, wide, or broad, and *ops*, eye, face, countenance. Thus, *europa* can mean ‘wide-gazing’ or ‘of broad aspect’. In the reconstructed proto-Indo-European language and religion, ‘broad’ is posited as an epithet for the Earth. As to ‘eyes’, Graves was of course familiar with such Homeric epithets as ‘grey-eyed Athena’ and ‘ox-eyed Hera’. The first recorded usage of *Europe* as a geographic term is found in the Homeric *Hymn to Delian Apollo*, in reference to the western shore of the Aegean Sea:

‘Here is the place I intend to erect a most beautiful temple  
now that will serve all men as an oracle; then they will  
always  
bring here, honoring me, their hecatombs full and effective –  
both those having abodes in the fertile Péloponnésos,  
and those dwelling in Europe and over the wave-washed  
islands –  
looking for oracles; then it will be infallible counsel.  
I will deliver to all of them here in my sumptuous temple’.  
So spoke Phoibos Apollo. (lines 287-94)<sup>4</sup>

As a name for a part of the known world, Europa was used in the sixth century BCE by the historians and geographers

Anaximander and Hecataeus. Anaximander placed the boundary between Asia and Europe along the Phasis River (the Rioni River of Georgia, in the Caucasus Mountains), a convention followed by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. Europe's eastern frontier was defined some two millennia ago by the geographer Strabo as the River Don.

Geographically, the British Isles, or as historian of Christianity Diarmaid MacCulloch terms them, 'the Atlantic Isles',<sup>5</sup> are part of the continent of Europe, although many anglophones use 'the Continent' as a way of conveniently differentiating between Britain and the rest of Europe. I have seen fit to raise this point because some of Graves's explanations for the name of the continent of Europe connect, not only to Greece and its myths, but to a broader geographical and mythological swathe, that is, to the Middle East and its myths, toponymy and history, and especially the history of migrations of tribes, peoples and ethnic groups. In this Graves was ahead of his time, as he was in so much else.

Moving from proto-Indo-European to Semitic languages, some etymologists have connected 'Europe' with a Semitic term for 'west,' that is, *erebu* in Akkadian (to set)<sup>6</sup> and the Phoenician *ereb*, meaning evening, or West. The latter were to become *erev* (evening) and *ma'arav* (West) in Hebrew, and in Arabic: Maghreb (West: and now a term for North Africa, which lies west of the Near East). Although most etymologists tend to reject the match between these Semitic languages and Europa's name, Graves would not necessarily have agreed with them.

In fact, as we find in *The White Goddess*, Graves sees Europe as, among other possibilities, the Full Moon, for which the Semitic languages, pointing in the direction of the West, or evening, are a source. Yet here, in a combination of etymology and mythology, Graves suggests that 'Europe is not only "she of the broad face," i.e. the Full Moon, but [...] she of the flourishing willows'. The willow, which thrives near sources of water, is sacred to the Moon-Goddess as the tree that loves water the most, and representative of dew (which appears at night), and moisture

generally.<sup>7</sup> In *The Greek Myths* Graves reports a version of the Europa narrative in which Zeus, having waded ashore in Crete in the form of a bull, becomes an eagle and attacks Europa in a willow-thicket beside a spring. Graves then parses the word *europa* not as *eur-ope* (wide eyes), but rather as *eu-rope* (good for willows), which may be said to mean ‘well-watered’.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Graves’s reference in *The White Goddess* to dew as a source of water which appears during the night (the hours ruled, as it were, by the moon) is of special interest to those familiar with Middle Eastern climates, where for the four or five months of the year in which there is very little rain, dew is seen as a divine blessing, an important source of water for the land (Graves, p. 173). The importance of dew as water for the irrigation of crops explains why, for example, prayers for dew are said at Passover, whose date corresponds to the end of the rainy season in Israel.

## The Story

Graves posits another meaning for the word ‘European’ in *The White Goddess*, i.e. ‘of Cretan extraction, based on a story in which Europa, daughter of Agenor, rides to Crete from Phoenicia on the back of a bull’ (pp. 272-273).

The story of Europa in written, literary form, based on earlier orally-transmitted myths, dates back as least as far as *c.* 150 BCE, to Moschus’ ‘Europa’. The following is a short outline of common versions of the tale, conflated from Graves and Moschus.

Europa was the daughter of Agenor, a son of Poseidon who settled in Canaan, and his spouse Telephassa. As Moschus would have it, on the morning when Zeus saw Europa and her companions dancing and bathing near the sea, Europa had been troubled by a dream in which two continents, each in the shape of a woman, tried to take possession of her: Asia, saying that she had given birth to the girl and another, who claimed that Zeus would give the girl to her.

Zeus fell in love with Europa and joined a herd of cattle disguised as a handsome snow-white bull. This herd was driven to the seashore at Tyre, in Phoenicia, where the girl and her friends were wont to walk. Struck by the animal's beauty, Europa began to play with him and even climbed on his shoulders. He suddenly swam away with her, eventually making landfall on Crete, where Europa became the mother of kings, bearing to Zeus Minos, Rhadamanthus and Sarpedon. The tale of Europa, in one or more of its permutations, is thus a story of migration from East to West, as are epics such as the Pentateuch and the Aeneid, to name but two.

### Queen Europa

Before focusing on Graves's 'The Secret Land', let us look at Moschus's epyllion. The following is Zeus's speech to Europa, spoken just prior to their landing on Crete and while he still bore the form of a horned bull:

Take courage, virgin! Nor the billow fear;  
 The seeming bull is Zeus; for I with ease  
 Can take at will whatever form I please;  
 My fond desire for thy sweet beauty gave  
 To me this shape – my footstep to the wave.  
 Dear Crete, that nursed me, now shall welcome thee;  
 In Crete Europa's nuptial rites shall be;  
 From our embrace illustrious sons shall spring,  
 And every one of them a sceptred king.<sup>9</sup>

This speech, made by a god and directed at a young woman, may be a justification on the part of Zeus for what would now be seen as an act of rape. In the above there is no doubt as to Europa's weakness, whether or not she finds Zeus attractive and accepts his forced attentions willingly: her compensation is that she is to be

the mother of kings.<sup>10</sup>

We shall now focus on Graves's 'The Secret Land'.

Every woman of true royalty owns  
A secret land more real to her  
Than this pale outer world:

At midnight when the house falls quiet  
She lays aside needle or book  
And visits it unseen.

Shutting her eyes, she improvises  
A five-barred gate among tall birches,  
Vaults over, takes possession.

Then runs, or flies, or mounts a horse  
(A horse will canter up to greet her)  
And travels where she will;

Can make grass grow, coax lilies up  
From bud to blossom as she watches,  
Lets fish eat from her palm;

Has founded villages, planted groves  
And hollowed valleys for brooks running  
Cool to a land-locked bay.

I never dared question my love  
About the government of her queendom  
Or its geography,

Nor followed her between those birches,  
Setting one leg astride the gate,  
Spying into the mist.

Yet she has pledged me, when I die,

A lodge beneath her private palace  
 In a level clearing of the wood  
 Where gentians grow and gillyflowers  
 And sometimes we may meet.<sup>11</sup>

‘The Secret Land’ makes a useful contrast to Moschus’s *Hymn to Europa*. Unlike Canaan, Phoenicia and Crete, which are well-known locations, the land over which Graves’s muse / queen rules is secret. There is, however, no doubt who holds power over this land which is more real than the ‘pale outer world’. Unlike Europa, the woman of ‘true royalty’ has at her disposal, as does Zeus, more than one means of transportation: she can run, fly (as can a god), or should she prefer to ride, she has the services of a horse: an animal presumably more suited to transporting a queen than a bull.

Moschus’s Europa is promised that she will become pregnant and be the mother of kings; but Graves’s queen will herself make trees, flowers and grass grow, will found villages, and even engineer the geography of her queendom in such a way as to create brooks and bays. Her control is complete, and as her servant, the poet would never dare to question her, neither as to ‘the government of her queendom | [N]or its geography’. The poet, unlike Zeus, does not make promises to his queen; at most he succeeds in extracting from her a promise that she will allow him, after his death, a lodge beneath her palace.

### **Epilogue: ‘England, my own generous mother’**

A discussion of Robert Graves and Europe would do well to include engagement with another poem of Graves’s, ‘General Bloodstock’s Lament for England’ beginning appropriately with the title. I hope to be allowed to assume that a possible source of the term ‘General Bloodstock’ is the *General Stud Book*, one of the first breed registries created (1791). Interested as he was in

myths of migration, whether of people or of animals, Graves may have known that all modern thoroughbred horses in England are said to be traced back to three stallions which were imported to England in the late seventeenth- early eighteenth century from the Middle East.

Graves precedes his poem with an epigraph from Robert Kirk's *The Secret Commonwealth*, set off in italics.<sup>12</sup>

### **General Bloodstock's Lament for England**

*This image (seemingly animated) walks with them in the fields in broad Day-light; and if they are employed in delving, harrowing, Seed-sowing or any other Occupation, they are at the same time mimicked by the ghostly Visitant. Men of the Second Sight . . . call this reflex-man a Co-walker, every way like the Man, as his Twin-brother and Companion, haunting as his shadow.*

Alas, England, my own generous mother,  
 One gift I have from you I hate,  
 The second sight: I see your weird co-walker,  
 Silver-zoned Albion, stepping in your track,  
 Mimicking your sad and doubtful gait,  
 Your clasped hands, your head-shakings, your bent back.

The white hem of a winding sheet  
 Draws slowly upward from her feet;  
 Soon it will mount knee-high, then to the thigh.  
 It crackles like the parchment of the treaties,  
 Bonds, contracts and conveyances,  
 With which, beggared and faint and like to die,  
 You signed away your island sovereignty  
 To rogues who learned their primer at your knees.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars have suggested fascinating approaches to this poem,

including the epigraph. Devindra Kohli, on the one hand, points out that: 'If the compulsive walk, then, can be seen as a reflection of the need for balance in opposing forces, integration with the self is suggested by Graves's use of the concept of the co-walker, the familiar ghost, or the lover's weird self', as depicted in the epigraph.<sup>14</sup> According to D. N. G. Carter, on the other hand:

A peculiar aspect of Graves's Englishness [is] its colonialism. For Graves's predicament as a twentieth-century poet is not dissimilar to the colonial's who will neither return to his country of origin nor become fully absorbed into his country of adoption. What sustains him is a myth, the myth of the frontiersman maintaining in isolation values long since betrayed at home.<sup>15</sup>

If I may be allowed to speculate, I am not sure that Graves would have seen himself as being 'sustained by the myth of the frontiersman'; and while he presumably would have agreed that the depiction of one 'who will neither return to his country of origin nor become fully absorbed into his country of adoption' applied to himself, he may not have seen this as a 'predicament,' a difficult or embarrassing situation. This poem does, however, express discomfort as to the situation of his country of origin: not because she is a colonial power abusing the peoples and cultures which she rules, but is, rather, a victim.

The epigraph of the poem, rare in Graves's oeuvre, points in the direction of mother England's gift to the poet: the 'second sight'. At first glance it is surprising that the poet would 'hate' what could be seen as an important aspect of the poetic gift. Yet on the basis of the epigraph, it may be that Graves does not hate the sight, but rather the sight of: 'the ghostly Visitant [. . .] your weird co-walker, | Silver-zoned Albion'. This figure, 'mimicking the queen as she delves, harrows, sows' (or, as does the woman of true royalty from 'The Secret Land', makes grass grow and coaxes lilies up from bud to blossom), haunts the queen she whose gait is

already sad and doubtful and whose back is bent.

In the body of the poem, England is envisioned as not only a 'generous mother', but as a victim of rape: her shroud is lifted to reveal what should be private. England is a queen, but one who was forced to sign away her 'island sovereignty'. Who, however, are the 'rogues who learned their primer at [her] knees'? Joseph Bailey has suggested that the 'rogues' may be Englishmen, possibly lawyers:

It certainly does seem that Graves could be referring to lawyers who draw up these documents and certainly could have 'learned their primer at your knees'. Also of course [. . .] it could refer to the financiers and money-men who may have increasingly 'beggared' Britain through loans, which would have to be agreed by the same method of contracts, written treaties etc.<sup>16</sup>

We might, moreover, at least entertain the possibility that these rogues include Britain's erstwhile North American colonies, where to this day schoolchildren are taught to appreciate the many gifts of the motherland to her New World colonies, and this despite her perceived lack of respect for the colonials and their leadership. But surely the treaties, bonds, contracts and conveyances which beggared England and brought her close to death include those imposed on the generous mother by her European neighbors. Thus, if Europa was raped by a god, while comforted with the thought of becoming the mother of kings, this poem may possibly suggest that while England may not be part of Europe, she may well be Europa.

**Nancy Rosenfeld** is Senior Teacher (Emerita) in the Department of English Studies and in the Humanities program at the Max Stern College of Jezreel Valley, Israel, and the author of *John Bunyan's Imaginary Writings in Context* (2018).

---

 NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adam Kirsch, 'To Fight Against this Age: On Fascism and Human', *Review: Barnes and Noble.com* 7 February 2018.

<<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/fight-age-fascism-humanism>> [accessed 7 May 2020]. 'Riemen personifies what he thinks of as the true, lost Europe in the figure of Europa, from Greek mythology. If "Princess Europa" returned to her namesake today, she would find that "from this Europe, the European spirit has gone."'

<sup>2</sup> An *epyllion* is generally defined as a comparatively short narrative poem written in dactylic hexameter. Although it may at times be a discrete tale embedded in a longer epic, its themes are not those primarily characteristic of the formal epic.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), pp. 504-05.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Homeric Hymn to Apollo', trans. by Rodney Merrill in *A Californian Hymn to Homer*, ed. by Timothy Pepper. Hellenic Studies Series 41 (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2011). <<https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6294.8-the-homeric-hymn-to-apollo-translated-by-rodney-merrill>> [accessed 29 Aug 2018]

<sup>5</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> The language of what is considered the first ancient Semitic-speaking empire of Mesopotamia, dating back to c. 2000 BCE.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, combined edn (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 195, 196-97.

<sup>9</sup> 'Moschus's Hymn to Europa,' trans. by M. J. Chapman, in *The Greek Pastoral Poets, Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus* (London: James Fraser, 1936) pp. 289-97 <[www.philaletheians.co.uk](http://www.philaletheians.co.uk)> [accessed 24 April 2020]

<sup>10</sup> Both Hagar and Rebecca are promised by the Deity that they will be mothers of nations: Hagar when pregnant with Ishmael and Rebecca during her pregnancy with Esau and Jacob, (Genesis 21.18; Genesis 25.23).

<sup>11</sup> *Complete Poems*, pp. 504-05.

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*, 1691 [first published 1815]: a treatise on fairy folklore of the Scottish Highlands, including witchcraft, ghosts, ‘second sight’. [Editor’s note: the sentence Graves ascribes to Kirk appears uncredited in the notes to Walter Scott’s *Legend of Montrose*, four years later.]

<sup>13</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 443.

<sup>14</sup> Devindra Kohli, ‘A Measure of Casualness: The Peripatetic in the Poetry of Robert Graves’, in *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. by Patrick J. Quinn (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), pp. 65-83, (p.76).

<sup>15</sup> D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 46-47.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Joseph Bailey for this valuable insight, first made during the conference and expanded in an email to the author 22 August 2018.

## Visioning the Impossible

*Nick Carter*

Upon reading the possible variations offered upon the theme of this conference, ‘Robert Graves and Europe: Good-bye to All That / But It Still Goes On’, I have chosen to talk about ‘the relevance of his writing for our European present and future’, and in doing so I shall bring in a writer who is a European par excellence: the Italian writer Claudio Magris – of whom more anon.

How do the present and future appear to us? No less gloomy than they appeared to W. B. Yeats, who wrote in 1919, ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; | Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’.<sup>1</sup> Or, ten years later, to Thomas Hardy, at the close of his last volume of verse: ‘We are getting to the end of visioning | The impossible within this universe.’<sup>2</sup> Or ten years later still, to W. H. Auden, whose ‘September 1939’ provides a weather forecast for our own time:

Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives.

For ‘obsessed’ we are becoming, with each morning an anxious scanning for some further development down the road to catastrophe, our present fears beginning to coalesce with horrible imaginings into dread of a Minotaur that awaits not simply Europe, but the world. And its expression is by no means the prerogative of established literature: it is the stuff of popular song, as in Bob Dylan’s ‘License to Kill’, a song either directly influenced by Graves’s thought, or else startlingly coincidental with it:

Man thinks ‘cause he rules the earth he can do with it as he  
 please  
 And if things don’t change soon, he will  
 Oh, man has invented his doom  
 First step was touching the moon  
 Now, there’s a woman on my block  
 She just sit there as the night grows still  
 She say who gonna take away his license to kill?<sup>3</sup>

It is also the stuff of cabaret poetry, such as Emile Sercombe’s  
*That adja goin dinnit* – reminiscent of Graves’s ‘Lift-Boy’:

All those souls blasted to never never  
 Because we trusted god  
 No wonder ee gave issself the option  
 Of having a load more ter be goin on with  
 When our planet snuffs it.<sup>4</sup>

And then it is also the stuff of prose, of journalism, such as that of  
 George Monbiot, writing, in 2017, of his recurring nightmare:

When I say this keeps me up at night, I mean it. I am  
 plagued by visions of starving people seeking to escape  
 from grey wastes, being beaten back by armed police. I see  
 the last rich ecosystems snuffed out, the last of the global  
 megafauna – lions, elephants, whales and tuna – vanishing.  
 And when I wake, I cannot assure myself that it was just a  
 nightmare.<sup>5</sup>

And when we ourselves turn to the news of the day there is  
 enough in it to explain why he cannot.

For we all share this nightmare in some measure, dread of the  
 hunger and violence that the Minotaur embodies. In this context,  
 discussion of ‘the relevance of Graves’s writing for our European  
 present and future’ expands to include the relevance of all art.

What do we expect of it? And should we expect of the artist answers to questions perhaps more properly addressed to the priest, politician, scientist, philosopher, journalist indeed? And the artist himself: how does he view his relevance to the common predicament? One of involvement or withdrawal? A Guernica, or an Ivory Tower? A Tennyson admonishing Gladstone: ‘Steersman, be not precipitate in thine act’, or a Yeats declining to write a war poem: ‘I think it better that in times like these | A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth | We have no gift to set a statesman right.’<sup>6</sup> As Eliot said in another context: ‘these cogitations still amaze | The troubled midnight and the noon’s repose.’<sup>7</sup>

Where, then, is Graves in all this? In the first year of Graves’s life, Thomas Hardy wrote three poems under the same title, ‘In Tenebris’, in the second of which he identifies himself as one ‘Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst’. ‘Twere not too curious to consider this as a gift from a Fairy Godfather to help through life one who from school onwards felt himself, to use the words of the poem, ‘as one shaped awry’, who ‘disturbs the order here’, a gift seemingly acknowledged when Graves came to write, some forty years on:

To manifest poetic faith by a close and energetic study of the disgusting, the contemptible and the evil is not very far in the direction of poetic serenity, but it has been the behaviour most natural to a man of my physical and literary inheritances.<sup>8</sup>

Such ‘study’ concentrated primarily on individual problems of the sort he itemises in the Epilogue to *Good-bye to All That*: ‘arguing morals, literature, politics, suffering violent physical experiences, falling in and out of love, making and losing friends, enduring blindly in time’ – in short, the problems of one whose context reinforces his sense of being – again in Hardy’s words: ‘one born out of due time, who has no calling here’.<sup>9</sup>

*Good-bye to All That* was his farewell to that context in its personal, one might say local, application, but there remained a wider context that his energetic studies inevitably pointed towards, namely the fate of civilisation itself. It is to this he addressed himself in the trenchant utterances of the poem ‘Recalling War’:

War was return of earth to ugly earth,  
 War was foundering of sublimities,  
 Extinction of each happy art and faith  
 By which the world had still kept head in air,  
 Protesting logic or protesting love,  
 Until the unendurable moment struck –  
 The inward scream, the duty to run mad.

There is no gainsaying, to use a favourite word of Graves’s, the authority of these pentameters, any more than one can argue with Prospero’s valediction to the ‘great globe’, or with the self-evident inevitability of Yeats’s ‘Man is in love, and loves what vanishes, | What more is there to say?’ – except that the ‘more there is to say’ is the bitterness of the realisation that *it still goes on*, that the main problem of paganism, as Graves frames it in *The White Goddess*, namely ‘Must all things swing round again for ever?’<sup>10</sup> is also ours: ‘A sight to be recalled in elder days | When learnedly the future we devote | To yet more boastful visions of despair.’<sup>11</sup>

But by the time he came to write that, Graves had already found a way to the better, as set forth in his Introduction to *The Common Asphodel*, 1949: ‘for the last twenty-two years [I] have abandoned the view that the poet is a public servant ministering to the caprices of a world in perpetual flux. I now regard him as independent of fashion and public service, a servant only of the true Muse.’<sup>12</sup>

He had expressed the same sentiment already in ‘The Fallen Tower of Siloam’:

It behoved us, indeed, as poets  
 To be silent in Siloam, to foretell  
 No visible calamity. Though kings  
 Were crowned and gold coin minted still and horses  
 Still munched at nose-bags in the public streets  
 All such sad emblems were to be condoned:  
 An old wives' tale, not ours.

Which leaves the majority of us among the nosebags (present company excepted, of course). Graves is famously unapologetic about this. *Good-bye* was not only to *all that* but 'to you and to you and to you': Us and Them, the genuine few and the hoi polloi, Eliot's crowd of dead flowing over London Bridge, so many.

Nevertheless, as Lionel Trilling observed, Graves does indeed believe in civilisation as, to use his own words, 'the graceful relation of all varieties of experience to a central humane system of thought'.<sup>13</sup> It is the present phase of civilisation he has no sympathy with, and little hope for its future. So, in his personal life he gets as far away as possible from its immediate effects:

Call me, if you like, the fox who has lost his brush; 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 still ruled by the old agricultural cycle.<sup>14</sup>

And for the world at large, well, as Owen stated in midst of other woe than ours: 'All a poet can do today is warn.' And this Graves does, in his prose, where we find such passages as the following, from 1961 edition of *The White Goddess*:

No: there seems no escape from our difficulties until the industrial system breaks down for some reason or other [...] and nature reasserts herself with grass and trees among the ruins (*White Goddess*, 1961, p. 482).

Or this, in terms not unreminiscent of the conclusion of *Candide*, from a lecture delivered to MIT in 1963:

What I should like to see is cultural reserves, protected from an outside influence, even from anthropological study – the natives being left enough fertile land and animal life to give them a decent chance of survival. If our own highly artificial culture blows up, only such reserves can preserve humanity.<sup>15</sup>

I include the dates of these excerpts to applaud Graves for warning us then, but also to indicate how little likelihood there is now, given corporate greed and climate change, of either nature reasserting herself or cultural reserves being created.

And what of his own future, from which the commonalty are perforce debarred? Graves's construct of the White Goddess and her incarnation, the Muse Woman with whom the true poet falls wholly and fatally in love, would seem proof against the kinds of problem that beset, say, Christianity. But among Graves's last poems, the majority of which are celebrations of his muse of the time, there are occasional indications of the construct beginning to crack.

Tell me, love, are you sick too  
 And plagued like me with a great hole in the mind  
 Where all those towers we built, and not on sand,  
 Have been sucked in and lost; so that it seems  
 No dove, and no black cat, nor puff of smoke  
 Can cause a shift of scene and fetch us back  
 To where we lie as one, in the same bed?

So concludes 'A Shift of Scene', unique among the muse-poems Graves wrote in his later years in its despairing realisation (is this the first time poetry has made use of the black hole?) that the whole magnificent structure of the White Goddess has, like the

cloud-capp'd towers of Prospero's vision, which these lines recall, dissolved and left not a rack behind.

For the twentieth century, which opened in nightmare, for Graves ended so. When visited by a Spanish journalist in his extreme old age he was troubled by three things: he did not know where his passport was; he was afraid that mechanical diggers were coming to destroy his garden; he was tormented by remorse for the men he had killed in the war, regarding himself as a murderer. The facelessness, mechanization, and violence of our age could scarcely be more succinctly emblemized.



Hardy closed his final volume of verse, *Winter Words*, with the poem 'He Resolves to Say No More', and at this point there may be those amongst you hoping that I will emulate him. But if we are to speak of our European present and future we need to hear the voice of a European who can write acceptably of the present: 'Europe is above all a culture, ours, mine; a culture which permeates our innermost fibres, a style and an atmosphere, a Κοινή, an inhabited world to which we spontaneously feel we belong.'<sup>16</sup>

We need a writer who can write responsibly of the future, who 'can and must speak of the concrete problems confronting Europe today, of what favours or impedes the process of European unification, of the possibilities or difficulties of one day reaching, [...] a truly European State': someone who can also write realistically of a past that has to be faced, since it overshadows both present and future:

One thinks of the unmentionable, barbarous conditions of wretchedness and labour compelled for so long upon millions and millions of men degraded to subhuman conditions of life; one thinks of the crimes and the genocides committed in the name of ideologies – a product

uniquely and perversely European. One thinks in the first place, obviously, of the Shoah and of National-Socialism in general, a depth of barbarism quite unequalled; and it was we Europeans who created Auschwitz. ('Europe', no page number)

Now I would not for a moment suggest that Graves was unaware of all that, but it does not enter his writing in so patent a manner, which to that extent limits its relevance for our European present and future. What also limits its relevance – speaking as an Englishman – is our own insular acquaintance with Europe, which makes it so easy for us to forget why the European Union was formed in the first place. Not to be aware of the immediate and far-reaching effects of the Second World War upon the countries of Europe is a prerequisite for membership of the Brexit club, which is why I wish to introduce here the author of the passages I quoted above – Claudio Magris: one time Professor of Modern and Contemporary German Literature at the University of Trieste, novelist, essayist, public lecturer, erstwhile senator of the Italian Republic, Erasmus prize-winner, but above all inhabitant of the melting pot of Central Europe – Trieste. His life and work are inextricably involved in what might turn out to be Europe's fate, or destiny. If Graves has a private obsession with the Muse, then Magris might be said to have a public one with Europe. However, getting to know Magris through his writings it was inevitable that I should at the same time be recalling Graves, whose own work has become over the years part of the furniture of my mind. Even though the two men are as different as age, experience, nationality, language and personal experience could make them, they are profoundly alike in their dedication to writing, in their belief in civilisation and the values that make it possible, and in their determined grappling, as writers, with an age they see as inimical to that dedication and that belief.

Perhaps Magris's best known work is *Danube*, the story of the writer's journey from the source of the river to its estuary, a story

which is no mere travelogue but an extraordinary vehicle for Magris's encyclopaedic knowledge of the history, geography, philosophy, literature, politics and language that pertain to the countries of Mitteleuropa – a kind of *White Goddess* in that it is a central expression of the writer's thought and belief. But the work that came afterwards also put me curiously in mind of Graves and his single-minded devotion to the Goddess. *The Voices* is a short dramatic monologue. The curtain rises on a room furnished only with a chair and a table, and upon it a telephone. This the protagonist makes continuous use of to call the ladies of his acquaintance, but only in order to listen to their voices as recorded on the answer phone. Should by ill chance the real woman answer the phone, he hangs up immediately. This put me comically in mind of Graves's distinction between the woman 'good as bread' and that impossible she 'as rare as myrrh'. But the comicality faded as I considered the comparison more attentively: the fate not only of the muse-woman should she fail to live up to her high calling, but also of the hopelessness of the poet's dependence on what, in 'Nightmare of Senility', he calls an 'archaic legend' – ultimately a construct which reality refuses. (I'm not sure whether it is fair to add that Magris's character turns out to be the inmate of a lunatic asylum.)

For common to both writers is the theme, born of experience, of the forlorn hope, and their admiration for those who, like Eliot's three Magi, persist in their quest despite the world's derision. So Magris repeatedly in his work adverts to the true story of the communists from Monfalcone, a town just outside Trieste, who at the end of the war crossed the border between Italy and neighbouring Yugoslavia to help rebuild the country in the name of Socialism, only to be thrown into brutal prison camps after they had protested against Tito's break with Stalin. Years later the survivors returned to Italy, only to find their homes occupied by others, the Italian Communist Party wanting little to do with them, and the Italian police harassing them as probable Communist spies. Magris concludes his account:

They are men who always find themselves on the other side, in the wrong place at the wrong time, who have also fought for a mistaken cause and believed in a deception, namely Stalin. But their moral strength, their heroic capacity for sacrifice and dedication, their willingness to sacrifice themselves to fight for the freedom of humanity at large, such are the virtues that constitute their greatest legacy and that we ought to make our own [...] it is a great story, to which I remain obstinately faithful.<sup>17</sup>

When I first read this story, what came immediately to my mind was Graves's poem 'The Cuirassiers of the Frontier', and what may be seen as a prose gloss:

Ordinary civilised virtues had given place to heroic ones. We remained free because we were volunteers and bound to one another by a suicidal sacrament. Holding a trench to the last round of ammunition and the last man, taking a one-in-three chance of life when rescuing a badly wounded comrade from no-man's-land, keeping up a defiant pride in our soldierly appearance: these were poetic virtues. Our reward lay in their practice, with possible survival as a small bright light seen at the end of a long tunnel.<sup>18</sup>

Had the two groups of men been able to meet, one feels they would have understood one another well.

Which leads me to the genre the two writers have in common, namely the historical novel – understood not as romantic fiction set in costume times, but as a means of righting an historical wrong, setting the record straight. Look at Graves's treatment of Claudius, of Belisarius, of Milton's wife, of William Palmer. Likewise, Magris will defend the Monfalcone communists, the deluded disciple of the philosopher Michelstaedter, the doomed Ataman of the White Cossacks, the manic collector of the war museum, Diego di Henriquez. Their driving concern is with the

---

search for truth – which brings me to the chief reason for my introducing Magris into this essay. For while there is a great deal in Graves's work I can respond to, there is nevertheless something central to the experience of Europe that I do not find in Graves but have become keenly aware of by living in Trieste, the city where Mussolini proclaimed his racial laws, which hosted the Risiera, the only death camp in Italy, which underwent what England, with the exception of the Channel Islands, was blessedly spared – Occupation – and all its attendant evils. This reality is at the centre of Magris's most recent book, *Blameless*, wherein he exacts a full look at Europe's worst. The scope of the novel is wide-ranging, but its focal point is the creation of a fantastic war museum, filled with whatever weapon, document, poster, uniform its manic collector can lay hands on, in the hope that all this paraphernalia of destruction will cure men of the will to war. However, as Magris relates:

In the end my [...] character makes a mortal leap from the search for dead objects to the search for truth, a terrible truth. In the labyrinth of his and my Museum there is a Minotaur, strangely silent until a few years ago, the Risiera of San Sabba. For while eventually all was known about the Nazi occupation, the tortures in the Villa Triste, the hostages hanged and so on, about the Risiera – silence. A forgetting, a scraping away of the collective memory, an amputation of the hippocampus of the city, of the country. History as neurosurgery. This lethargic, dull silence is one of the reasons that have compelled me to write this book.<sup>19</sup>

To conclude; what these two writers have devoutly in common, I should hazard, is this regard for the truth of the past, without which the present and future are founded on lies and deceit, on whitewash like the walls of the Risiera. This monitory function of memory informs 'Recalling War' and *Blameless* alike. But in its exercise memory has a more lasting effect. It is responsible, in

---

Graves's case, for that most poignant of elegies, 'The Last Day of Leave'. In Magris's case, for the inexpressibly sad account he gives in his book *Microcosms* of the forlorn hope of his aunt Esperia. Both poem and prose are, in the phrase of the former, a 'blind-fate-aversive afterword', the perennial plea, from Dido's Lament to the woman about to enter the gas chamber: 'Remember me'; like Graves's trees in 'Advocates' ("Yes, yes?" they plead). And if I were asked what I best remember of the works of both writers, it would be those passages where they themselves are remembering; and the bond thereby created, like Auden's 'affirming flame', is what their work has to offer Europe, for without such bonding we are for the dark. The Inspector's impassioned adjuration at the close of J.B. Priestley's famous play is as germane to 2018 as it was to 1945 – if not more so:

We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.<sup>20</sup>

Or as the 95-year-old Harry Leslie Smith puts it, in terms that echo both St. Paul and George Orwell: 'Hope, decency and empathy are the building blocks for our civilisation', and the greatest of these, I am tempted to say, is empathy, that 'eternal reciprocity of tears' that lies at the core of Wilfred Owen's rage against insensibility, and at the core of all art. '*Sunt lacrimae rerum*', Aeneas utters as he looks upon the paintings of the Trojan war, '*et mentem mortalia tangunt*'. The power of art to awaken us to that truth, to touch us as no other discipline can, is its relevance, and it is a power that both Graves and Magris possess.

**Nick Carter** is the author of *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement*.

---

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming' (lines 3-4).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'Tuesday Poem: We Are Getting to the End' (lines 1-2).

<sup>3</sup> Bob Dylan, 'License to Kill' *Infidels* (New York: Columbia Records, 1983) side one, song four.

<sup>4</sup> Emile Sercombe, *That adja goin dinnit* (London: Apples and Snakes Pluto Press, 1984), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> George Monbiot, 'We Can't Keep Eating Like This', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2017 <<https://www.monbiot.com/2017/12/13/we-cant-keep-eating-like-this/>> [Accessed 12 April 2020] (par. 14 of 17)

<sup>6</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'On Being Asked for a War Poem' (lines 1-3).

<sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'La Figllia Che Piange' (lines 23-24).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Graves, *Collected Poems* (London: Cassell, 1938), p. xxiv.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That, an Autobiography: Original Edn*, ed. and annotated by Fran Brearton (London: Penguin Books, 2014, [1929]), p. 447.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, ed. by Grevel Lindop (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013), p. 195.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Graves, 'Recalling War', *Collected Poems 1914-1947* (London: Cassell, 1948), p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Graves, *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poets and Poetry, 1922-1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. x.

<sup>13</sup> *White Goddess* 2013, p. 302.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, 'Nine Hundred Iron Chariots', in *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Claudio Magris, 'Europe,' unpublished essay in the possession of the author.

<sup>17</sup> Claudio Magris, 'Between the Danube and the Sea: The Itinerary of a Writer', unpublished essay in the possession of the author.

<sup>18</sup> D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> Claudio Magris, 'No Case to Answer', unpublished essay in the possession of the author.

<sup>20</sup> J. B. Priestly, *An Inspector Calls* (New York: Pearson, 1993), p. 56.



## The Archetype of the White Goddess in Robert Graves, Maja Herman Sekulić, and Ted Hughes

Tanja Cvetković

*The White Goddess* (1948), a controversial and complex book by Robert Graves, is based on the myth about the pagan divinity of matriarchal cultures and religions present in the ancient world. This book accompanied a significant concept in the poetic vision of Graves and has influenced many contemporary writers and thinkers. We could talk about the White Goddess as a mythological and archetypal symbol which could be singled out of the context of modern literary interpretations. The archetypal pattern makes a good association with the work of Northrop Frye, the well-known literary theoretician, and proponent of the ritual and mythological school of criticism. Frye's work, especially *Anatomy of Criticism*, has been an inspiration for Serbian authoress Maja Herman Sekulić, but Frye's archetypal interpretation of literature could be applied to Graves's modern poetry as well. Namely, the subject of this paper will be Graves's introductory poem in the book *The White Goddess* as reflected in Herman Sekulić's long poem *Lady of Vincha* (2017). Since the archetypal symbol of the White Goddess has been present in many literary works, we will make a brief turn to its pre-figured forms in the work of the British writer Ted Hughes who noticed in his book *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992)<sup>1</sup> the recurrence of various themes, motifs, a basic structural pattern which he called Shakespeare's 'myth'. The monumental work would not have been possible without Graves's *The White Goddess*.

Herman Sekulić was well acquainted with the work of Northrop Frye, while Graves was one of the writers (together with George

---

Orwell, Samuel Beckett, Giorgio Bassani, T. S. Eliot, etc.) whom Frye discussed and mentioned frequently in his works. Apart from successfully using archetypal symbols in her poetry, Herman Sekulić did an interview on 5 December 1979 with Frye. The interview was included into one of the thirty volumes of the collected works and essays on Frye.<sup>2</sup> In his oeuvre Frye discussed many authors whose ideas were related to the basic postulations of his criticism, including Graves. Though he admired *The White Goddess*, Frye focused on the irony of the myth for which he said was symptomatic of the human effort to ‘screw the inscrutable’.<sup>3</sup> According to Frye, Graves does not belong to the group of writers of the traditional mythopoetic school, to which T. S. Eliot belonged, but to ‘the tradition of the writers who have turned mythical erudition into satire’ (p. lvi). Consequently, in Frye’s opinion, Graves’s contribution is not in creating a ‘systematic mythology’ but in depicting ‘mythical use of poetic language, where we invent our own myths and apply them to an indefinite number of human themes’ (lvi). In that sense, we can view the prefigured mythical symbols in Graves’s poetry, as well as in the poetry of Herman Sekulić, and Ted Hughes, the way Frye describes the achievement of some authors to the development of the mythopoetic school of criticism.

In her essay ‘Mit i struktura’ (‘Myth and Structure’) published in the journal *Polja*, Herman Sekulić points to the significance of Frye’s work for understanding all of literature and emphasizes his contribution to the field of archetypal criticism and the theory of myth. Frye’s concept of the structure of literature is based on the assumption of the authenticity of myth according to Herman Sekulić, who points to Frye’s conclusion that literature is reconstructed mythology. One can make such a claim only by reducing myth to archetypes. Though he thinks that there is no equation between mythology and literature, Frye concludes that in every imaginative work of art there are archetypal patterns which recur (such as the symbol or the metaphor of flood, paradise, hell, romance, etc.). In that sense, Herman Sekulić’s essay emphasizes

Frye's idea that mythology is the matrix of literature to which poetry returns over and over again because it finds there great themes based on the principles of analogy. The conceptual frame of Frye's criticism is myth and archetype derived from literature itself.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, in four essays, Frye defines the concept of the archetypal symbol. For Frye archetypes are 'communicable symbols',<sup>4</sup> or typical and repeated images common to all men. The archetype as a symbol connects one work of art with another, one poem with another, and helps the integration of our literary experience into the whole. Literature becomes a way of communication and the archetype as a symbol has a communicable power with unlimited potential. When we understand the meaning of one symbol the use of that symbol becomes recognizable to a great number of people who easily comprehend specific communicable associations of symbols:

When we speak of 'symbolism' in ordinary life we usually think of such learned cultural archetypes as the cross or the crown, or of conventional associations, as of white with purity or green with jealousy. As an archetype, green may symbolize hope or vegetable nature or a go sign in traffic or Irish patriotism as easily as jealousy, but the word green as a verbal sign always refers to a certain color. Some archetypes are so deeply rooted in conventional association that they can hardly avoid suggesting that association, as the geometrical figure of the cross inevitably suggest the death of Christ. (p. 102)

Accordingly, in Frye's definition of the concept, archetypes are specific symbols which recur in similar forms in different cultures.

In Frye's view, in its archetypal phase the poem imitates nature as a cyclical process. The principle of recurrence in the rhythm of art derives from the repetitions in nature. Thus, the archetypal critic studies the poem as part of poetry and poetry as part of

human imitation of nature (p. 105). In that sense, Graves's White Goddess, who inspires the poet, reflects the whole life cycle from birth to death including rebirth as well. In addition, Graves thinks of poetry as 'religious invocation of the Muse',<sup>5</sup> which reflects man's wish to live in harmony with nature and to respect the symbols of poetry and the Muse. However, in the modern world, the White Goddess is reduced to a second-class divinity, and the symbols of poetry are degraded, while the moon, as the symbol of the Mother Goddess, the Muse and poetry, is despised 'as a burned-out satellite of the Earth and woman reckoned as "auxiliary State personnel"' (p. 14). While introducing the female divinity, the Goddess, the queen, as the centre of his poetic universe, who persists in spite of the natural life cycle, Graves gives a response to the dominant patriarchal myths. As life itself, the Goddess included all female aspects: the virgin, the lover/mother, the hag. However, the modern world has changed the function of poetry and the approach to the female divinity. The modern world has become the world 'in which money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet' (p. 14). At the beginning of *The White Goddess*, the introductory poem later revised and anthologised as 'The White Goddess', indicates clearly that the moon and the White Goddess should be admired as humanity's dedication to divinity and the female principle.

Herman Sekulić uses language comparable to Graves in describing the Lady of Vinča as 'the very first poet, proto poet, proto artist',<sup>6</sup> the Moon-goddess, whom the inhabitants of the Vinča culture celebrated 5700-4500 BC. Lady of Vinča is the famous Neolithic figurine with triangular or pentagonal face, the protruding angular cheekbones, dreamy half-closed eyes, usually with her arms bended over her heart. She was the symbol of the rule of the female principle in Europe, but also the symbol of the first alphabet and messages inscribed in the Vinča script, the first proto letters still unknown to science. The mysterious magic signs of the proto Vinča letters were mystic and puzzling like the

figurine itself. Herman Sekulić has given this figurine a name after the ancient Greek word *maia* – mother, the mother of Hermes, meaning proto mother. She explains that she is ‘the White Goddess, wife, sister and mother of us all that spells with the hawthorn branch’ (p. 6). Hawthorn, or the May-tree, is the tree of purity and purification and the Romans never married in May named after it, further explains Herman Sekulić in the ‘Prologue’ of her long poem. This goddess had her nine muses who abided by the river Helicon (in Greek *helyce* – meaning willow, another tree mentioned in the poem).

Graves considers the White Goddess as ‘immortal, changeless, and omnipotent’, whom ‘men feared, adored, and obeyed’.<sup>7</sup> She was the Moon-goddess and represented the three phases in the maturity of woman: youth, the maturity, old age. Herman Sekulić uses the same motif in her poem and describes the Goddess:

The Goddess of Moon, he loved her  
Lips, her small feet, he kissed,  
He sculpted her in clay, in stone,  
With those big eyes, masked,  
Omniscient, omnipresent –  
‘Not of this world’, in awe he prayed. (p. 21)

Accordingly, she represented another trinity: the girl (air), the nymph (earth), the old woman (the underworld), and analogously the three Greek divinities: Selene, Aphrodite, and Hecate. However, as the yearly cycle of the sun rehearsed the ascent and decline of natural power, spring of the girl, summer of the nymph and winter of the old woman, the Great Goddess symbolized the changes in the vegetative and natural world. Herman Sekulić called this divinity Lady of Vincha, and the goddess Maya:

She was his, mine – Maya, our Proto Mother,  
Lady of Vincha, of Divostima, of Danube,

Bent arm over her heart, in prayer, in spite,  
 Painted black and red to stand out among equals,  
 The mistress blessed of a Thousand-Year Empire,  
 From Mura to the south of Vardar river,  
 Peaceful and fair as in fairy tale. (p. 21)

Herman Sekulić connects the nine priestesses, or the nine Muses, who are inevitably part of Graves's oeuvre, with the archetype of the White Goddess.

You invoke your white-faced Muses, sisters,  
 Priestesses,  
 To dance, to pray for miners in the orgiastic  
 Trance  
 When they come from Earth to lay tired in your  
 Embrace  
 Bringing you shells and crystals, malachite and  
 Cinnabar,  
 Over seven hills and seven seas, from the end of  
 The world,  
 To renew their masculine strength in your lap. (p. 17)

She reminds readers of the special power and strength of the White Goddess as woman and mother, in the time which renounces and degrades the female principle (Frye's tragic mode in the archetypal criticism) which she opposes to the divine principle of birth and love embodied by the Great Goddess:

I will give birth again when hawthorn trees  
 Bloom  
 In spring, the cruel time.  
 Womb is life  
 Womb is tomb  
 I am the mistress of both  
*Not knowing it.* (p. 36)

The White Goddess is the fertility goddess and the goddess of life who rules the underworld, known variously as Hecate or Persephone. She embodies life as wholeness, in all of its aspects: the life cycle of the vegetative and animal world. It is exactly these attributes of the goddess that Herman Sekulić glorifies.

*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* glorifies female divinity as the embodiment of the wholeness of life and applies the thesis to some of the most popular Shakespeare's plays. Hughes's study is based on two myths which Shakespeare incorporated in his long poem, 'Venus and Adonis', and in the poem 'The Rape of Lucrece'. Hughes's understanding of poetry is linked to the mythical story of the White Goddess. Though he called Graves's *The White Goddess*, 'the chief holy book of my poetic conscience',<sup>8</sup> he creates his own vision of the rule and fall of the supreme female divinity, which underwrites his explication. Hughes sees the crucial conflict in Shakespeare's plays between the natural order symbolized by the Venus myth and the Puritan sensibility represented by the myth of Lucrece. In Shakespeare's drama the conflict between the two mythological tendencies were combined into 'the composite myth of the English Reformation itself'.<sup>9</sup> Hughes further explains that Shakespeare's conflict between natural religion and the Puritan sensibility is susceptible to two interpretations. Transposed into another symbolic level, the conflict is between nature, including humanity's own nature, the natural world, and the world of technological progress and human achievements. Hughes explains the conflict between two myths in terms of 'tragic equation'.

Shakespeare's formula of 'the tragic equation' is based on the spirit of the period in which he lived. Shakespeare had actually unearthed the psychological law of the Reformation which he applied in his sonnets and plays. 'The tragic equation' is for him 'a mythic expression of the psychological drama then being staged in the conscience, and most of all in the subconscious, of Queen Elisabeth I's subjects.'<sup>10</sup> As Shakespeare's original myth is based

---

on two traditional myths, the way of combining them takes the form of an equation:

where the first half, by its own inherent dynamics, produces the second half [...] always producing the rebirth into transcendence by the same chemistry. [...] And I have called that particular dynamic event, by which the energies of the first half of the Equation explode, transformed, into the second, 'the Shakespearean moment'. (Hughes 1992, p. 1)

At the origins of 'the tragic equation' is the rejection of the Goddess, which is the result of the hero's 'fearful ego-vision' (p. 215), which splits the character's personality into two parts. The Goddess is seen not only as the Goddess of love but also as the Goddess of destruction as she might plunge the hero into ruin. She has both her divine and her diabolical sides, the latter usually suppressed by religion (Christianity); this denial of the diabolical is what Shakespeare and Graves both criticize. The division of the Goddess into the Sacred Bride/Divine Mother and the Queen of Hell produces the 'double vision' of the hero. In the next phase of the 'tragic equation' myth, the hero rejects the Queen of Hell, even fearfully loathing her, which may even result in her being raped, according to Hughes.

There are similarities but also differences in Hughes's and Graves's visions of the Goddess. Like Graves, Hughes focuses on the powers of the Goddess. He criticizes the effects of Puritanism on the human psyche, which affects the acceptance and understanding of the Goddess. Like Graves, Hughes also discusses the division of the Goddess. He borrows the story from Graves and explains the triple form of the Goddess as Sacred Bride/Mother/Queen of the Underworld. Graves sees parallel narratives of the myth of the Goddess from ancient Greece to late English Romanticism, while Hughes notices the important conflict of the story, which he elaborates in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. For both writers, on the one hand, there is the

natural order symbolized by the story of Venus, and on the other hand, there are forces that embody logic, rationalism, even chaos symbolized by Richard III, Macbeth, the law-maker Prospero in *The Tempest*, etc. There is always a Goddess-destroying God who embodies the patriarchal principles, the law of order, reason, logic, and violates the rule of the Goddess.

As Hughes cannot accept the loss of the Goddess, which for him, as for Graves, means the loss of poetry, he also works on the re-introduction of the Goddess. In my opinion, Hughes's discussion of the Goddess in Shakespeare's plays seems to be the continuation of ideas Graves expressed in his work. When the normal order is destroyed, it is the Goddess who is invoked to restore it. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the violation of the Goddess and the female principle is corrected in Berowne's passionate conversion to the divinity of love when he delivers the long rhapsody to love's power:

Other slow arts entirely keep the brain  
And therefore, finding barren practisers,  
Scarce show a harvest of their heavy toil;  
But love, first learned in a lady's eyes,  
Lives not alone immured in the brain,  
But, with the motion of all elements,  
Courses as swift as thought in every power,  
And gives to every power a double power,  
Above their functions and their offices  
It adds a precious seeing to the eye;  
A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind;  
A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound,  
When the suspicious head of theft is stopp'd:  
Love's feeling is more soft and sensible  
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails:  
Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste.  
For valour, is not Love of Hercules,  
Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?

Subtle as Sphinx; as sweet and musical  
As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair;  
And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods  
Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.<sup>11</sup>

In the play, the King of Navarra's oath to scholarship excludes woman and the love of women, as Berowne points out with dismay. The plot is made to correct the wrongheaded project and all three lords and the king fall in love. The Princess of France, whom the king falls in love with, has her three ladies, who stand for her three selves, imposing a new mode of life, the one that is centred on the Goddess/princess and her love. Berowne and his friends get converted to the powerful goddess while their course of self-transformation, in a retreat, withdrawn from society, is abandoned. The Goddess and her three selves represent a reformed plan for Lord Berowne and the King. Though Berowne's long speech of his conversion to love's power, made in the tradition of 'courtly love', has little to do with real passion and sensual love, his grand phrases of love are an act to seduce women. Though it is Shakespeare's contribution to courtly love, it easily lends itself to interpretation as the mysterious impact the Goddess has on men and men's submission to her power.

Graves, Herman Sekulić, and Hughes mention those values of humanity (as well as common sense), which have been destroyed by the patriarchy. Graves's complex vision of the Goddess is based on an archetypal pattern and as such served as the basis for Hughes's work. Herman Sekulić traces back the pattern even further to the times of the Vinča culture. Her poem 'Lady of Vincha' gives the prefigured archetype of the White Goddess on the case of the historical events and the archaeological findings of the Vinča figurines, which appeared in different forms and different cultures through time. The poet uses the archetype of the Great Goddess to introduce the motifs of birth, rebirth, love, which dominate the poem, and which is also emphasized in the work of Graves and Hughes. However, this long poem represents

---

a feminist reading of myth as well as the use of the White Goddess archetype. Herman Sekulić opposes the destruction and the suppression of the female principle by glorifying the new findings and events given from the perspective of the renewed female principle.

The love of the Goddess is the archetypal pattern that all three authors trace in their work. Like many writers, Graves, Herman Sekulić and Hughes tell us a story and create a kind of a labyrinth out of their text. The text leads the reader through a myriad of possibilities guiding them down the paths of the story and its many meanings wherever it might take them. In the labyrinth the beginnings and endings are blurred; the ending becomes only a new beginning. It is the same old story – the one story – as Graves would say: the story of the Goddess and her consort, of the death of the king and his rebirth. A way out of the labyrinth is to tell a story again because the story has a beginning and an end; or at least we think so.

**Tanja Cvetković** is on The Faculty of Philosophy, University of Nis, Centre for Foreign Languages.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, 30 vols, *Interviews with Northrop Frye*, ed. by Jean O'Grady (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008), XXIV, pp. 476-482.

<sup>3</sup> *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, 30 vols, *Northrop Frye on Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. by Glen Robert Gill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), XXIX, p. lvi.

<sup>4</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 118.

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Maja Herman Sekulić, *Gospa od Vinče/Lady of Vincha* (Beograd: Pešić i sinovi, 2017), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985), II, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> Ted Hughes 1992, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Joanny Moulin, 'History & Reason in the Work of Ted Hughes', in *History in Literature*, ed. by Hoda Gindi (Cairo: University of Cairo, 1995), p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 324-345.

---

## Poet in the Nursery

*Michael Joseph*

One goes plodding on and hoping for a miracle, but who has ever recovered the strange quality that makes the early work (which follows a preliminary period of imitation) in a sense the best work? There is a fine single-heartedness, an economy of material, an adventurous delight in expression, a beginner's luck for which I suppose honest hard work and mature observation can in time substitute certain other qualities, but poetry is never the same again.<sup>1</sup>

Let's start with a joke: a student approached Jean Paul Sartre one day and said, 'Maestro, I am seriously contemplating suicide', to which Sartre is believed to have replied, 'of course!' Stanley Fish, who is to creative hermeneutics what Sartre was to suicide, might have said 'of course' to Peter Howarth's observation: 'Robert Graves makes it impossible for the reader to distinguish quite what belongs to the poem and what to her.'<sup>2</sup> Throughout his writing life, Graves drew attention to this epistemological dilemma in poems such as 'The Reader Over My Shoulder', 'My Name and I', 'To Bring the Dead to Life', 'The Ghost', 'In Broken Images', 'Counting the Beats', 'The Magic Picture', 'The Face in the Mirror'. He even suggests in 'The Magic Picture' that the poem can produce no knowledge external to itself, and any knowledge a reader might take from a poem is inherently suspect.<sup>3</sup> The poem inevitably raises the question, which Graves is Graves, a question implicit (at the very least) in Graves's poetic acts of ambiguous and conflicted self-figuration. I want to look at a very early poem, so far untreated by other critics and scholars for underlying gestures that anticipate these more accomplished performances.

## ‘Allie’

I’ll begin by framing my analysis with reference to another early-ish and better-known poem, ‘Allie’, written in 1920. ‘Allie’ is a wistful, mysterious evocation of bucolic childhood, as well as, without seeming to be, a polemic against warfare and the culpability of innocence – a veiled criticism of adult innocence as merely the outward trappings of a stunted conscience.<sup>4</sup> It seems also to be a private lament for lost comrades, which strictly follows the rules for (and against) grieving laid down in Charles Sorley’s ‘When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead’, a poem that touched Graves deeply as we see in his essays (his example of Sorley as a good poet in *On English Poetry*),<sup>5</sup> and several of his letters. For example, to Edward Marsh (24 Feb. 1915):

‘I’ve discovered a brilliant young poet called Sorley whose poems have just appeared in the Cambridge Press [...] & who was killed near Loos on Oct. 13<sup>th</sup> as a temporary captain in the 7<sup>th</sup> Suffolk R. [Regiment]’

It seems ridiculous to fall in love with a dead man as I have found myself doing but he seems to have been one so entirely after my own heart in his loves and hates.<sup>6</sup>

Graves would not stick to Sorley’s valediction forbidding mourning, as we see in ‘Haunted’, a poem published in *Country Sentiment* (but later removed from the canon). However, he both mourns and suppresses mourning in ‘Allie’.

But one might turn ‘Allie’ ninety degrees and see in it a clash of conflicting views of England, a double-vision that anticipates Graves’s self-exile:<sup>7</sup> on the surface, the poem presents a comfortable Georgian landscape of sweet, familiar sensations and home truths; yet, concealed in the images and literary references are glimpses of a barbarous nation whose cherished beliefs and conventions entail death and desolation. One can read into this dichotomy Graves’s double-view of himself as a Romantic poet in

the tradition of Blake and Keats, and a soldier who ‘killed many men’.<sup>8</sup> In my reading of ‘Allie’, I describe this vision of liminal displacement as the intentional object of the poem – it is finally what ‘Allie’ is about – as well as a metaphor for the wayward and contradictory nature of awareness, both the poet’s and his readers’. ‘Allie’ shows us plainly that Graves comprehended his own internal conflicts and sought to express them on some level in the self-conscious interpretive agnosticism noticed by Howarth.<sup>9</sup>

### ‘The Gnat’ and ‘Gnatiness’

Often the conflicts that surface in Graves’s poems have been ascribed to post traumatic stress disorder.<sup>10</sup> The poem Graves himself most explicitly associated with war-trauma, ‘The Gnat’, published in *The Pier Glass* (1921), has developed its own discourse. Graves offered an interpretation in *The Meaning of Dreams* (1924). The grotesque narrative concerns a shepherd named Watkin who is tormented by a malignant gnat that has gotten inside his skull. Despite Watkin’s attempts to rid himself of this pestilence, the gnat grows to giant size, until finally, goaded by his suffering, Watkin thrashes about with an axe and accidentally kills his sheepdog; in that moment, the gnat flies free of Watkin and vanishes. Watkin survives, despite the prophecy that his hour of doom was at hand; but without a sheepdog, he is forced to abandon shepherding for a less fulfilling livelihood. Watkin lives, but not the shepherd Watkin: the prophecy is fulfilled in the death of Watkin the shepherd and the survival of a Watkin that is not Watkin.

Graves explains, “‘The Gnat’ is an assertion that to be rid of the gnat (shell-shock) means killing the sheep-dog (poetry).”<sup>11</sup> Critics Cohen, Carter, Quinn and Kersnowski, all fall in line behind Graves’s explanation, that he had become dependent on his war neuroses as a spur for his poetry.<sup>12</sup> But Kersnowski points out that toward the end of *The Meaning of Dreams*, Graves qualifies the

value of straightforward analysis – presumably including his own. ‘As a matter of fact, the logical interpretation of a non-logical poem does not [...] explain it altogether; as a poem it has a certain intense and not to be defined quality which must disappear in translation.’<sup>13</sup>

Reading between the lines, we see Graves recalibrating his allegory; now that the gnat may be read as a symbol of the illogical, we can easily see the shepherd as the reader struggling to fully understand what cannot be understood, and the sheepdog, the poem ‘as a poem’. Dispatch the illogical and you lose the poem. Dispatch the gnat and you lose ‘The Gnat’. If we adhere to Graves’s interpretation, we must examine its inconsistencies, or rather its consistent inconsistencies.

Actual shellshock (to use Graves’s word) is real and persistent in Graves’s life and work. But if we forbear from assigning it full explanatory power – which is to say resist the temptation of turning it into myth – it emerges as an ambiguous signifier that serves as a comprehensible, stabilizing evocation of an indefinable psychological structure that survives in Graves from childhood and is indeed an integral part of him: Graves, the poet: Graves as Graves.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, while Graves scholars have productively reconsidered Graves’s denial of the extent to which shellshock affected his post-war writing, there remains a poetic principle within his denial that is consistent with Graves’s entire ontology. In the ‘illogical element in poetry’ chapter of *Poetic Unreason* (1925), he warns us against imposing biographical structures onto poetry. ‘Poetry is not as some people want it to be, a condensation and rearrangement of past events, according to a preconceived logical structure [...] but a new entity whose past is past.’<sup>15</sup> Here he is not merely deprecating biographical criticism, but his own insistent predilection for logical analysis. He is acting on the side of the gnat. Thus to foreground shellshock (or any social construct not poetry) as a self-evident truth is if not to kill the sheepdog, then to badly injure her, or to deny the aesthetic presentness of the poem, or, to draw again on Graves’s oppositions, to insist that its

allegory is static rather than metamorphic: merely ‘confined to a single theme’ (150).

If we persist in seeking biographical traces of the poetic, we can catch glimpses of pre-war ‘gnatiness’ in Graves’s famous account of childhood in *On English Poetry* (1922). His description of ‘amazed wondering, sudden terrors, laughter to signify mere joy, frequent tears and similar manifestations of uncontrolled emotion’ seems to mirror his own behaviour.<sup>16</sup> In volume one of his three-volume biography, Richard Perceval Graves recalls earlier ‘frightening experiences’ in Graves’s childhood predating Charterhouse. At nine, ‘[s]o sensitive was he that he was “overcome by horror” at the sight of the older boys, who bathed naked in the open-air swimming-pool. “I had not known”, Robert wrote later, “that hair grew on bodies”.’<sup>17</sup> R. P. Graves also records the young poet saying ‘he “was in a sweat of terror” whenever he met the headmaster’s young daughter and her little girl-friend, because “having no brothers they once tried to find out about male anatomy from me by exploring down my shirt-neck”’. (p. 52)

‘A sweat of terror’ and ‘overcome with horror’ echo phrases in *Good-bye to All That* describing the hypersensitive responses of a neurasthenic soldier. Jean Moorhouse Wilson sympathetically recounts the abuse the adolescent Robert van Ranke Graves endured at the hands of his Charterhouse classmates who resented both his oddness and German middle name, and provides a plangent example of Graves linking poetry with madness:

Whether his ‘heart went wrong’ as a result, for physical or psychological reasons, is impossible to say, but he was forbidden to play football for a time. His most extreme measure was to ‘sham insanity’, which succeeded unexpectedly well, especially after his first poem appeared in the school magazine, *The Carthusian*: ‘This was considered stronger proof of insanity than the formal straws I wore in my hair.’<sup>18</sup>

In these anecdotes, Graves's high-strung, temperamental behaviour seems consistent with his post-War behaviour, such as leaping up at the sound of cars backfiring or at the ring of the telephone. Of course, these latter responses were conditioned by or induced by shellshock: but not determined by it. What we see in the post-war, shell-shocked Graves had its roots in a condition implicated in a mode of consciousness that Graves associated (I will say of his own free will, though he would later ascribe agency to the impersonal force he called The White Goddess) with poetry.

After the war, Graves may have identified shell-shock with the gnaw of poetic inspiration, but clearly the mode of consciousness capable of containing anything as extravagant as the gnaw, or apprehending it as the sacred (or, to phrase it somewhat differently as something that cannot be reduced to the symbolic order of experience), epitomized that which Graves felt inspired to protect from the rational and hence reductive, 'cure' of the psychoanalyst. In this perspective, war-trauma is itself a reductive, desacralizing, term, crucially at odds with poetry.

### **'Who Did That'**

In 1902, at age seven, Graves asked his mother Amy (Amalie von Ranke), if she could 'leave him money in her will: not for any selfish purpose, but so that he could buy a bicycle and ride upon it to her grave'.<sup>19</sup> Only three years earlier, Amy 'entitled a slim red notebook *The Red Branch Song Book*, and began writing verses to amuse her children' convalescing from whooping cough.<sup>20</sup> She also allowed them (Clarissa or Claree, Rosaleen and Robert or Roberty, not yet four) to compose poems in it as well. It is one of these 'understudied' poems I would like to analyse. The poem is untitled, but for convenience I am going to refer to it by the first line, 'Who did that'.<sup>21</sup>

---

I have transcribed the poem, keeping the indents as written but justifying the left margin as I believe was intended. I've also preserved the punctuation, or relative lack thereof.

Who did that?  
Said the grown up cat.  
I not  
Said the dot.  
I did, said the spider  
With my glass of cider  
Then came the fox  
With his little box.  
Then into the room where  
    The four were placed  
Came a very big girl  
    With some nasty paste  
Then she pasted the four  
Against the door  
She said My dears  
I have my fears  
My mother will scold me soon  
For she has gone  
To Wimbledon  
Under the Silver Moon

To begin with the most obvious of observations, Graves wrote his first poem while ill or recovering from illness, thus anticipating the connection he would draw later between illness (shellshock) and poetry.<sup>22</sup> And as obvious perhaps, 'Who Did That' is indebted to 'Who Killed Cock Robin', suggesting that Amy read the nursery rhyme to Robert or Roberty as she called him and his sisters, perhaps even while they were quarantined at Red Branch Cottage. Peter and Iona Opie note 'Cock Robin' first appears in print in the eighteenth-century children's books sold by John Newbery but cite literary antecedents such as John Skelton's

*The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe*. Coincidentally, in 1918, at age twenty-three, Graves would publish a poem praising Skelton, which, like ‘Who Did That’, uses rhymed iambic couplets and tercets, and includes a reference to a sparrow: Phyllyp Sparowe: ‘How for poor Philip Sparrow | Was murdered at Carow | How our hearts he does harrow.’ This isn’t to suggest the shell-shocked twenty-three-year-old poet, looking back at Skelton, and Phyllyp Sparowe, recalled ‘Who Did That’, but that persistent affinities connect the post-war poet with his younger self in deeply intriguing ways.

One can also find affinities between ‘Who Did That’ and Graves’s studies of poetic form and mythology. If I over-perform the text, as Fish, and perhaps as the older Graves, imply we cannot help doing, even up to the point of committing a kind of hermeneutic suicide, I might suggest Roberty anticipates Graves’s intuitive apprehension of the ‘Cutty Wren’ theory, which posits a pagan survival in ‘Cock Robin’, recollecting the ritual sacrifice of the king.<sup>23</sup>

Reading ‘Who Did That’ more safely as the first of Graves’s many dream poems, we can see it drawing power as a poem from the awakening poet’s precocious simulation of how the dreaming mind shifts through transpositions of reality. The poem starts with an accusation and introduces four cartoon-like characters. The first of these is the cat making the accusation (or the author who becomes the cat by his attribution); the following three respond with contrasting defences. The first respondent is the jot above the lower-case I, whose denial ‘I not’ connotes self-denial, if we take the ‘I’ to refer back to the speaker (perhaps the poet who has slipped into the role of the cat, and is, indeed, no longer Roberty). The transformed glyph illustrates that Roberty has an intuitive grasp of how poetry’s elasticity can mimic the elasticity of dreams, and marks the first appearance of the grotesque element we encounter again in ‘The Gnat’. After ‘I not’, follow the spider’s facetious confession and the fox’s suspiciously tardy arrival.

---

This introductory, dialogic, phase of the poem terminates with the sudden appearance of a fifth character, a girl characterized as ‘very big’. Her arrival culminates in a violent act of pasting, and the simultaneous contraction of the individual entities to ‘the four’, which reveals that cat, jot, fox and spider are not conscious characters within the landscape of the poem, as they are first presented to us, but drawings, or marks on paper: symbols mediated by other symbols on paper, the poem. As such they remind us of the epistemological problems readers will ponder in later poems.

With the ‘very big girl’s’ appearance, the centre of consciousness also contracts to that of a single self, though one whose affect is unstable, turning from brash and bold to fearful. After dispatching the four, she fears that she will be reprimanded, whether for some undefined transgression that can either be assigned to the act of pasting, to the nasty paste she’s smeared on the door, to something else, a thing that cannot be named, or to nothing, no reason: the irrational.

Then the poem undergoes another transition as the very big girl contemplates the fairy-tale-like disappearance of her mother (an exit balancing her entrance as well as the contraction of the characters in ‘the four’) which leads to the fourth and final segue that introduces the ‘Silver Moon’, an image that, as remarked by RP Graves, derives from the first poem in *The Song Book*, Amy’s ‘The Lost Child’. With an eerie ambiguity, the moon, the object of the very big girl’s gaze, seems almost to jutter toward subjecthood, recapitulating the opening theme of an inanimate entity capable of consciousness, and suggesting an act of inanimate or transhuman scale-balancing. Altogether, the direction the narrative takes is unpredictable yet decisive, lively, multivalent, and strangely logical: dreamlike.

Before solving the central mystery of the poem, ‘who did that?’ (and what ‘that’ is), I want to look at the confident formal control of the not-yet four year old poet and demonstrate that the poem’s structural complexity expresses the conflicted, ambiguous



Robert.  
 Who did that?  
 Said the grown up cat.  
 I not,  
 Said the dot.  
 I did, said the spider  
 With my glass of cider  
 Then came the fox  
 With his little box.  
 Then in the room when  
 The four <sup>NYPL</sup> w<sup>o</sup> played  
 Came a very big girl  
 With some rocky park  
 Then she poked the fruit  
 Against the door  
 She said My dears  
 I have my tears <sup>soon</sup>  
 My mother will scold me  
 For she has gone  
 To Wimbledon  
 Under the Silver Moon

Page from *Red Branch Songbook* (The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

The text is clearly written out in pencil, so if he thought he'd made a mistake, he could easily have corrected it, or had it corrected, and line ten is amply indented, allowing room for another word at its head.<sup>26</sup> More interestingly, the confident pattern of the previous couplets argues that Roberty was acting purposefully. I believe that placing 'where' at the end of line nine is a poetic choice reinforced by the indentation of lines ten and twelve. It seems that he intended these four lines to construct a stanza and indicated their separateness from the previous string of couplets by indenting the even lines, ten and twelve and enjambling lines nine and ten. His decision isn't childish or capricious; it has a pragmatic pay-off. Bending the foot around the line ending, as it were, spurs the passage forward, dramatizing intrusion, speed, and encroaching crisis. Somehow, the evidence suggests, the preschool poet, aided by his five and seven-year old sisters, has re-invented enjambment for this specific poetic effect.

We find the crisis impressed firmly into the rhyme scheme. The pattern established in the initial octet of uniformly end-rhymed couplets concludes with line eight. Line ten, 'The four were placed' (F1, where we would expect to find E2), violates the pattern by not rhyming with 'where', line nine. 'Placed' not only does not rhyme with 'where', it *emphatically does not*. The phonological difference between the sibilant 'placed' with its unvoiced dental t, and the r-controlled air sound 'where' calls attention to the absent rhyme, just as the indent calls attention to the idea of alteration or modulation. And, of course, both call our attention to the idea of something missing or indefinable: the mystery at the heart of the poem. The formal disruptions in layout, the pattern of end-stopped lines and rhyming couplets serve as an overture to the very big girl's big entrance on line eleven, and the havoc she creates. With this stanza, Roberty breaks decisively with his model; he is no longer copying 'Who Killed Cock Robin', and is in fact heading toward John Skelton, and beyond.

Line eleven, 'came a very big girl', is a remarkably unchildish line, piling anomaly on top of anomaly: 1) the size of the new

character is disproportionate; 2) the new character is human, not anthropomorphic; 3) and she is gendered; 4) the word ‘girl’ at the end of the line does not rhyme with either ‘where’ or ‘placed’, and thus it additionally warps the poem’s couplet pattern; 5) it inverts the usual order of parts of speech: ‘came a very big girl’, an anastrophe emphasizing the extraordinary liminality and illogic (or dream logic, the insistent parenthetical) of the passage, and amplifying the anxiety felt by ‘the four’ (provoked either by being interrogated or by the girl’s size, gender, species, or uncertain, volatile, disposition, or perhaps by a kind of transcendent awareness of their terminal insubstantiality); 6) the line disrupts the cadence of the poem. Up until now, Roberty has allowed two pulses to each line:

Who [. . .] that?  
 [. . .] grown [. . .] cat.  
 I not  
 Said [. . .] dot  
 I [. . .] spi  
 [. . .] glass [. . .] ci [. . .]  
 Then [. . .] fox  
 Lit [. . .] box  
 [. . .] in [. . .] room [. . .]  
 [. . .] four [. . .] placed

With the additional emphasis on *ve-ry* on line eleven, calling attention to and reinforcing the novelty of the phenomenon by introducing the poem’s only adverb, Roberty communicates the unprecedented size and three-dimensionality of this new creature and perhaps the shock felt in her presence by ‘the four’; the adverb also insists that this extraordinary event has ontological weight: it is a very big *deal*: it matters in a way ‘the four’ do not, that the girl has girth, that she inhabits three dimensions, not two: materiality matters – the materiality of the poem; therefore, by association, that the crisis in rhyme has spread to meter *matters*.

With the manifestation of the girl, the four characters congeal into one gluey mess. Their independent identities cease to be – indeed, illogically, they cease ever to have been, and we now see them, not as they seem to have been to themselves, *an sich*, but as they might appear to ordinary human eyes, just as we see her as they seem to: large and in charge, overbearing and grotesque: a precursor of the intolerable gnat. Perhaps we even see the four as they now see themselves through her eyes as things to be organized or disorganized: just as the card people at the end of *Alice in Wonderland* might have seen themselves through Alice’s eyes.<sup>27</sup> This is

precisely the sort of perspectival oscillation that we find in for example ‘The Gnat’, and in ‘The Portrait’, in which the subject object relationship of male and female, is overturned in the final phrase “And you, love, as unlike those other men | as I those other women?”

Carter observes that ‘childhood is a constantly recurring feature of Graves’s verse’.<sup>28</sup> I think this is an important insight, to which I will add, *even in childhood.*



‘Childhood’ is a mental construct through which we first experience the sacred (by which after Eliade I mean order, coherence, meaning, the real), and so the mind never fully relinquishes it, just as the gnat never goes away. By subjecting his dream to the rigor of poetic structure, Roberty is able to transcend the particular and the trivial and impart in poetic form an observation about the nature of experience mediated by childhood.

But, just as the older Graves, at age twenty-nine, writing *The Meaning of Dreams*, deems the gnat indispensable to his poetry, so, too, is the very big girl indispensable to the fabric of the poem she seemingly vitiates. Her actions on line ten disrupt the rhyme scheme, but then repair it on line twelve, with the word ‘paste’, rhyming ‘placed’, completing the unbounded or ballad quatrain: ABCB. Thus, Roberty makes the act of destruction simultaneously the act of creation, which ‘paste’ cleverly points out (reattaching bits of the broken rhyme scheme as one might reattach torn scraps of paper or scrapped verse). Just as this agent of chaos seems to be demolishing the poetic structure, she rebuilds it, or it rebuilds itself through her, by recycling chaos as a metamorphic structural element. The affirmation travels up the chain of signifiers: Incoherence becomes an aspect of coherence, and inconvenient poetic insight completes a schema in which it *matters*. Poetic insight arrogates to itself ontological weight.

Having sealed the breach of EFG, Where | Placed | Girl, and then re-absorbed the anthropomorphic qualities the marks on paper had borrowed back into the human, the poem then returns to its rhymed couplets, but with a difference:

Then she pasted the four  
 Against the door  
 She said My dears  
 I have my fears

13

Although lines thirteen through sixteen seem to reprise the motif of rhymed couplets (line thirteen even repeats the same word as

line seven, establishing a lexical identification beyond metamorphosis), in fact it diverges from what we might call rudimentary or perhaps immature motif in an ingenious and problematic way. In addition to the pair of perfect rhymes AABB (or HH/II), four/door and dears/fears, the lines contain a pair of imperfect rhymes: four/fears; door/dears (HI/IH, or H1/I2; H2/I1). Weaving together perfect and imperfect rhymes, Roberty accomplishes yet another technical feat, which he once again models as a structural metaphor. The four end rhymes appear either to be converging into one indistinct monorhyme, in mimicry of the implosion of ‘the four’, or else, conversely, struggling out of the one, a lost morphological etymon comprising ‘four, door, fear, dear’, to become four, signifying the creative gesture, and more immediately, the creation of this (first) poem. And that lost notional wholeness that creation requires phonologically plays into the poem’s theme of loss, conveyed explicitly by the lost mother and the loss of agency exemplified by the cat, the fox, the spider and the I-less jot.

We can stretch probability a bit further and view the tensions in this pair of couplets (particularly the tension between the perfect and imperfect rhymes) as a struggle between dominant and subordinate personalities, an opposition that harkens back, once again, to ‘The Cutty Wren’. Here I want to point, in passing, to the obvious affinities between this binary and the vision of royal succession, the storied combat between the oak and ivy kings, under the spell of The White Goddess, which, the older and wiser Graves (age fifty-two: Graves as Graves) will propound as the original monomyth for the tale of ‘cock robin’.<sup>29</sup> The similarities in form and content illustrate the way Graves embroidered stories with multi-layered symbols around the vital tensions he found within himself and his writing.

We call the subcategory of imperfect rhyme superimposed on this pair of couplets pararhyme (also, rim rhyme or alliterative assonance), and define it as a rhyme containing a vowel variation within the same consonant pattern. The *Wikipedia* illustrates the

form in another intriguing coincidence with a Welsh *cynghanedd* written by none other than Captain Graves during the War, but first published in *The White Goddess*.

Billet spied,  
 Bolt sped.  
 Across field  
 Crows fled,  
 Aloft, wounded,  
 Left one dead.

The tensions between the perfect and imperfect rhymes (pararhymes) present as well in ‘Who Did That’. In ‘Billet spied’, the pararhymes form couplets, while alternating lines bring together other rhymes: a third pararhyme in lines one/three, and a perfect rhyme in lines two/four, sustained over line five and repeated on line six. The rhyme’s repetition (‘dead’, ‘fled’, ‘sped’) denies the resolution of the initial long vowel (‘spied’), performing in the rhyme’s timbral dimensions the struggle between safety desired and denied. In the earlier, ‘Who Did That’, Roberty superimposes the pararhyme on the rhyme to perform the very big girl’s anxiety (it would appear). He sustains the counterpoint, if not the pararhyme, in the following lines, seventeen through twenty, which conclude the poem:

My mother will scold me soon                    17  
 For she has gone  
 To Wimbledon  
 Under the Silver Moon

Here the rhyme has migrated to the 2nd and 3rd, and 1st and 4th positions (lines eighteen/nineteen, and seventeen/twenty). The sense of safety or closure the enclosing rhyme (soon/Moon) might have afforded readers is disturbed by the vowel dissonance in the

couplet positions: positions 1/2 and 3/4 (lines seventeen/eighteen, and nineteen/twenty).

On line eighteen we expect a rhyme to 'soon' (line seventeen). On the model of lines thirteen to sixteen, HH and II, we expect J2 (i.e. June, moon, croon). But instead we get 'gone', following J1 with K1. We logically read 'gone' as a formal stumble, a garden path rhyme. But J2 ('Wimbledon') followed by K2 ('Moon') assures us that the swerve to K1 (instead of J2) was a sure step within a deliberately improvised pattern, JKKJ, an enclosed-rhyme quatrain, again with a distinct pay-off. By rhyming the enclosing 1/4 lines (JJ), and the enclosed 2/3 (KK), the quatrain echoes the imperfect rhymes in the proceeding pair of couplets (four/fears; door/dears); and with its own imperfect rhyme (gone/Wimbledon), it once again foregrounds and reinforces a sense of uneasiness and mercurial self-awareness conveyed by the preceding pararhymes.

I find the musical dissonance in the slight phonological slip between 'Wimbledon' and 'gone' utterly beautiful. The missed match combined with the drawn-out vowel in 'gone' suggests an anxiety-induced slip of the pen, a slight lapse of self-control from which the poet will nimbly recover to make the final rhyme soon and moon perfect: yet, almost too perfect to be quite reassuring. Despite being in a subordinate, interior, position, the imperfect rhyme lingers, scraping against the smooth veneer of the perfect. Again, there is a palpable benefit to these technical moves. By overwriting the imperfect rhymes on thirteen and sixteen (four/fears) with perfect (soon/Moon), the stanza joins the combat between dominant and subordinate personalities, transmuted the very big girl's emerging anxiety, and transmitting it to the reader.

|                              |                          |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| My mother will scold me soon | Then she pasted the four |
| For she has gone             | Against the door         |
| To Wimbledon                 | She said my dears        |
| Under the Silver Moon        | I have my fears          |

The symmetrical meter locks the rhyming lines in place while boldly displaying their duality.

My mother will scold me soon                    17  
 For *she* has gone  
 To *Wimbledon*  
 Under the Silver Moon.

The two ‘A’ lines (seventeen/twenty) replay the heavy three-beat measure, a variation introduced into the poem in the anastrophic line eleven, ‘Came a very big girl’, while the lighter two ‘B’ lines (eighteen/nineteen) continue to sound the signature measure of the poem, a two-beat measure. The weaker dimeter lines recede but never disappear, while the poem’s final line, the dancing trimeter (‘My mother will scold me soon | Under the Silver Moon’) plays a ghostly solo in the penumbra of the poem after the text recedes. The triple cadences seem to continue to fall through which we may imagine we hear the dissonant gone/Wimbledon, as almost a muffled chant.

Analysing repetition in music, Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis describes how group chanting followed by silence can set up a physical experience of ‘singing that never ends’, or a musical figure that moves ‘from the sounding, external world of the co-participating community’ into ‘the interior, subjective, felt world of the individual’.

This connection that can exist between sounding music in the external world and imagined music in the internal one has been hypothesized to set up the conditions whereby a person can

experience a highly pleasurable sense of extended subjectivity, or a perceived merging with the music.<sup>30</sup>

Roberty's triple cadences create a comparable sense of merging that tweaks the boundaries between reader and poetic music with an exquisite effect we have learned to recognize and admire in his mature work. In 'Counting the Beats', for example, the repetition of 'you and I' promises the beloved addressed in the poem a transcendent continuity (which the repeating figure of the amphimacer performs metrically).

If we step back from our analysis of the line, we see that lines seventeen through twenty form the poem's second quatrain. Concluding the poem, they also allow readers their first glimpse of the poem's structure in its entirety. It becomes possible to consider that Roberty intended the first quatrain, which initially seemed structurally wayward, to introduce a binary pattern, in which it does double duty: both as a transformation and restatement of the rhymes and meter producing the initial couplets, and as the initial quatrain of a dyad, thus a symbolic assertion of the poem's split personality. At this point we may even infer the presence of a third crisis in the asymmetry of the poem: four couplets | a quatrain | two couplets | a quatrain. The final quatrain speaks over the two additional couplets that would give the poem perfect structural symmetry. The disappearing couplets suggest the disappearance of the girl's mother as they trace the movement of the poem's centre of consciousness from dream to uneasy waking.

In *Effects of Musical Expertise and Boundary Markers on Phrase Perceptions in Music*, Neuhaus, Knösche & Friederici found that people listening to music tend to view pieces with an AABB (couplet) structure as sequential, and an ABAB (stanza) structure hierarchical, and possessing greater coherence.<sup>31</sup> If we apply their finding to 'Who Did That', the poem assumes a tripartite structure: (1) moving from a position of relative simplicity (sequential) to one of relative complexity (hierarchical), or from lesser to greater coherence, then (2) retreating to

simplicity / incoherence, and (3) returning to complexity / coherence. We might say the poem emerges from a chrysalis of fraught relationships between contextual poles, and heuristically label them innocence and experience. However (and once again we have the benefit of reading the poem against the poet's later work), seating the iteration of innocence within the pararhyming couplets suggests a wilful subversion of innocence, a subversion that will mature into self-interrogation. Even though Roberty is not even a third of the way to fifteen, has not declared poetry his 'ruling passion', and has no idea of ivy or oak kings, goddesses, or the 'One Story', the possibility for all of this is in the air. There is implicit struggle and displacement – gnat and shepherd at loggerheads – field vying with figure, self contending with counter-self.

We can spot the counter-self emerging again in the mutable identity of the penultimate passage, lines thirteen through sixteen. On their own, they appear to be two intermediate couplets. But, bracketed by non-identical hierarchical quatrains, they acquire the hybrid identity of a quatrain with sequential rhymes, a heroic stanza: thus these four lines can be defined as a pair of couplets, as a quatrain, *or* as a provisional quatrain: a quatrain with an unstable, dissonant, identity (neither innocent nor sophisticated).

No less astonishing than his proficiency with meter and rhyme is the toddler poet's skill in gaining our sympathy for the monstrous girl, in spite of the blood, figuratively speaking, on her hands, which, once again, reveals enigmatic tensions and polarities that inform the shell-shocked Graves, and suggest an innate 'gnatiness'. The very big girl's mother has probably left her an orphan (there's no father in the picture), and she fears dreadful punishment.<sup>32</sup> Her crisis is the last semantic crisis of the poem. Having precipitated the first (determinate quatrain one), she is the victim of the second (determinate quatrain two). She, an entity with greater ontological weight, overwhelmed the four and now, in turn, she is overwhelmed by the 'Silver Moon', which lends her fate a sense of the *unheimlich*.

With the introduction of the moon, the poem completes its sketch of the ladder of being (the *scala natura*): drawings of small creatures on paper at the bottom, small animals above them, then humanity comprising children, and mothers, then the uppercased 'Silver Moon' – the celestial entity, marked both by capitals and by the poem's one and only use of colour: just as he spent the poem's lone adverb 'very' to exemplify the girl's dominance over the four, Roberty reserves the lone colour word to highlight the moon's dominance over all. He pointedly analogizes the very big girl and the moon. The moon's qualities, its colour, radiance, capacity for heavenward flight, overawes the girl, just as her vast sentient humanity overawes the four. It also suggests her contradictory nature: she is both dominant and subordinate, mercurial and as capable of change as the moon, a subject possessing authorial intent, and a sign to be animated and valorised by meaning and intentionality. As a symbol of psychological domination, the moon in this early poem powerfully suggests that Roberty had a sense of his own contingency (as a sick child, youngest of three, and solitary male, might), and that weakness was inexplicably fused to unpredictable flights of fantasy.

In setting up an equation, as the very big girl is to the four, so the moon is to the girl, the poem repositions the reader's sympathy with the weak and vulnerable, pointing out the universality of dread in the face of the *mysterium tremendum*. And if we categorize the jot and the other drawn characters as marks on paper, the poem seems to be inviting our admiration for the dreamlike, transpersonal power of poetry by which creatures, humans, and the supernatural are all made and fluently remade.<sup>33</sup>

The patterns described above are well-known to most of Graves's readers, though some may wonder to find them in this cornerstone text. However, everyone will spot the similarities between the final image of the Silver Moon in 'Who Did That' and the moon in 'I Hate the Moon', penned in 'August 1915 (after a moonlight patrol near the Brickstacks)'.<sup>34</sup> The moon appears

immediately on the poem's first line, a kind of thesis statement, whose brash, contrary declaration seems to echo 'Who Did That'.

I hate the Moon, though it makes most people glad,  
 And they giggle and talk of silvery beams—you know!  
 But *she* says the look of the Moon drives people mad,  
 And that's the thing that always frightens me so.

I hate it worst when it's cruel and round and bright,  
 And you can't make out the marks on its stupid face,  
 Except when you shut your eyelashes, and all night  
 The sky looks green, and the world's a horrible place.

I like the stars, and especially the Big Bear  
 And the W star, and one like a diamond ring,  
 But I *hate* the Moon and its horrible stony stare,  
 And I know one day it'll do me some dreadful thing.

Notice that the voice of 'I Hate the Moon' is far from the hard, laconic, voice of 'Billet spied.' It is unsoldierly, if we take the narrator of *Good-bye to All That* as the standard. And the images, e.g. giggling, eyelashes, a diamond ring, are feminine by convention. Similarities between this persona and the very big girl in 'Who Did That' (lines fifteen-twenty) stand out. We must also admit a similarity between the setting of 'I Hate the Moon', with its green sky and the moon's 'horrible, stony stare', and the scene of Wimbledon under a bright, scolding moon in 'Who Did That', as well as the very big girl's absent mother and the mysterious 'she' in the later poem's first stanza. Even if Graves hadn't published this poem as one of three 'Nursery Memories', we would still recognize it now as the older sibling of 'Who Did That'.<sup>35</sup>

Kersnowski finds the presence of battle fatigue in 'I Hate the Moon' and speculates that Graves's mind is bending under the stress of constant war anxiety, even regressing. I would suggest

that Graves's mind is deliberately turning toward the three-year old self who wrote 'Who Did That', perhaps, a dream version of it. That nursery/dream moon overlays this one, which soon after the patrol he described as 'evil' in a letter to his father. If Graves's mind is bending (as is his gender) under the stress of war, that should rightly be regarded as a critical observation rather than psychoanalysis, for one sees the same bend in 'Who Did That', the same thrusting fear of death that metamorphoses into the image of the silent moon, the same 'she-ness', the same anxiety. But, why is it necessary to see Graves's reversion to childhood here as a retreat from the anxiety of war? In *On English Poetry*, written twelve years after 'I Hate the Moon', he provides a logical pretext for adopting a childish perspective in poetry:

"[D]reams are illogical as a child's mind is illogical, and spontaneous undoctored poetry, like the dream, represents the complications of adult experience translated into thought-processes analogous to, or identical with, those of childhood.<sup>36</sup>

We want to claim access to Graves's psychology in 'I Hate The Moon', but we can more justifiably claim access to his technique, his linguistic play.

This I regard as a very important view, and it explains, to my satisfaction at any rate, a number of puzzling aspects of poetry, such as the greater emotional power on the average reader's mind of simple metres and short homely words with an occasional long strange one for wonder (68).

Should we insist on deriving meaning from psychoanalysis, we must acknowledge that we are seeing in 'I Hate the Moon' a specifically Gravesian psyche; and, that Graves, himself, is acutely conscious of it. He knows himself as both victim and conspiring partner to the cruel intrusion of the irrational, in its myriad of forms and disguises, and I would argue this knowledge, which seems (with regard to 'Who Did That') almost to pre-exist experience, palliates his suffering. It provides him with a crucial catharsis (self-knowledge is both cure and disease), as it might for the reader, pencil in hand. We might extrapolate further and say

that Graves the soldier poet of 'I Hate the Moon' recognizes shellshock as a familiar if ever-strange entity, or rather he perceives in shellshock the impress of something he has known forever, the 'certain intense and not to be defined quality which must disappear in translation'. Uncomfortable though it is, it is the emblem of an all-powerful, ontologically saturated world, and thus a vital safeguard against the unimaginable, the emptily profane: the translation.<sup>37</sup>

That Roberty is already aware on several levels of his own divided self can be ascertained in other ways, perhaps even by his distribution of the narrative among the girl, the 'grown up cat' (which seems a foreshadowing of her), and himself. We also see an awareness of the divided self in the portrait of imbalance, or perhaps a contrapposto balance, advanced in the poem's subtextual melodrama. The very big girl's matrifocal anxiety and her apprehension of the powerful moon are highly evocative. Being full-sized, the girl seems to suggest the full moon, 'cruel and round and bright', and by the same token, a very large jot. Perceiving the moon as a lidless, all-seeing eye aware that she has violated a taboo, whether that be stripping the four of their singularity, mobility, agency and vitality, daubing the wall with stinky paste (a crude artistic act), or something worse, she is presented to us viewing and judging herself with cold impartiality: a 'hard, stony stare'. Gazing at the moon gazing back at her, as though from a silvery mirror, the girl experiences (and represses) guilt. Reading the moon as a luminous hole in the black sky, the girl fears her mother will fall into it, or, she will, herself, without her mother's protection, big and powerful as the poem deems her to be, for she has not been pasted down.<sup>38</sup> The fact that the poem, itself, disappears with the evocation of the moon reinforces the moon's potency and menace, its capability of wielding a devastating, otherworldly power.

I'd like to conclude my discussion by considering the question: who did that? The line imitates or even derives from 'Who Killed Cock Robin', but, less obviously, it also echoes the opening line

of *Hamlet*, 'Who's there?' And the definitive ontological question, which hovers over *Hamlet*, what is real, is very much on the lips if not on the mind of 'Who Did That'.

Roberty conceals the nature of the act: the 'that' (which 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' suggests is murder), as well as the identity of its perpetrator. While the jot immediately denies the accusation, and the fox belatedly enters the scene and does not appear to have heard the question (his tardiness, a brilliant dramatic foil), the spider blurts out a confession. But we are obviously meant to discount it, for it is nonsense. The murder weapon, a glass of cider, is not only incapable of doing harm, even to the drinker, but is transparently so. Perhaps Roberty even meant the rhyme to be a joke at the spider's expense. Although the spider confirms that there was a 'that', a prior act that prefigures the nasty pasting the girl gives the four and the goose-bumps she will experience beneath the moon, his or her arachnoid confession is ironic; surely it is meant to be exculpatory, even perhaps burlesque, an inverse claim of innocence, in which the poem demonstrates an awareness of irony and reminds us that we should regard avowals of innocence as sceptically as confessions of guilt. Roberty may even be suggesting that the spider intended its absurd confession to amuse, or, insidiously, to inspire trust – an enticement to all prospective flies (or gnats) to come just a little bit closer.

But the question 'who did that?' seems to have an answer to which the poem provides clues. The conspicuously furtive fox is a suspect, though, again, not a convincing one. And, what of the mysterious box? A box might be a weapon, though more usually a coffin or a casket for ill-gotten gains (the sort of gains an ill poet might boast). The box may be construed to be incriminating evidence of yet another crime, not necessarily unrelated to the one at hand. Moreover, as a container it suggests the containing (and contained) structure of a poem or a stanza, which may shed a new and sinister light on the poem's impromptu quatrain outbreaks. Are they also boxes of purloined goods, rhymes and images stolen from earlier poems, traditional verse or perhaps, as R. P. Graves

suggests, one of mother's? The infant's bounty of adult language then may not be a symbol of mastery in the sense of achieved or even purloined sophistication, but a hasty, premature rejection of the condition of innocence.

The word 'stanza' derives from the Italian word meaning standing place or room; and in drawings, rooms often appear as open boxes. So, while the fox draws attention to himself, he also reflects attention back onto the poem, the box he, and, momentarily we, inhabit. Fox and spider then both suggest surrogates of the wily, protean poet.

Furthermore, what shall we think about the cat? Is s/he merely curious, or inquisitorial and bossy? Is s/he beyond suspicion? Is there nothing curious about his/her curiosity? By characterizing the cat as 'grown up', Roberty seems to be hinting that the anonymous perpetrator of the putative crime is *not* grown up. He supports the implication by using, again, a parallel construction. On line eight, he characterizes the fox as *little*, anticipating the appearance, three lines later, of the very *big* girl. Similarly, and by analogy, by characterizing the cat as 'grown up', he seems to be planting a clue that the perpetrator of the foul deed is a child, and thus supposedly innocent, yet still guilty. And this opposition previews the dialectic of innocence and sophistication that plays throughout the poem, while it also suggests a paradox, therefore trapping the rational mind in a box of its own ratiocination (anticipating the later 'Warning to Children').

Since the unnamed act is a McGuffin that brings the poem into being, the guilty party may be (this will surprise no one) the perpetrator of the poem, the curious maker of stanzas and puzzles, the youngest child or belated arrival, the soapy-fingered spinner of sticky webs, the as-yet not completely formed I, and maybe a drinker of sweet cider.<sup>39</sup>

The girl would have been the artist who drew the four since it was she who mounted them for display on the wall, or secured them to structure, either to prevent precipitous transport or to enable them to survive the soap-bubble collapse of the dream.

Her guilt is simultaneously her pride of creation; and from here we can pursue or at least gaze out on the poem's allegorical references to the fall, from whose quintessential symbol one may derive cider, and procreation.

The various threads seem to converge at the simultaneity, or coincidence, of sacred and profane. At its core, poetry is murder: creation entails destruction since it liberates the irrational which, gnat-like, wreaks havoc on the pre-existing order by abolishing the rational distinction between opposites: the gnat's truth is 'that profane human existence may be hell, but it is simultaneously heaven',<sup>40</sup> or creativity may propitiate joy, but it also admits dread and suffering, which it also mitigates.

And, again, a child creator presumes on the prerogatives of adults. Indeed, 'The Poet in the Nursery', the initial poem in the Carcanet collection of Graves's poetry from which I have copy-pasted my title, begins precisely in that act of subversion. A poet in the nursery breaches the boundary between adult and child, thus it is a scandal: not a murder *per se* but symbolically so since it erases or rubs out identities. The grown-up cat in our poem may then *not* be asking but rhetorically *admonishing* the child poet, the way a parent might a child or a mischievous cat: "who did that?"; and the gang of four may not represent a police line-up so much as a host of disguises through which the child poet seeks to protest his innocence, or, simultaneously, innocently confess his guilt, while, ironically, re-enacting for his own pleasure, and that of the reader over his shoulder at Red Branch Cottage, versions of the initial offense. (Let me point out here that Graves published well over fifty books of poetry, and there are 835 pages of poems in *The Complete Poems in One Volume*,<sup>41</sup> so it is probably safe to say, he must have enjoyed writing his first poem a lot.)

Considering the identification of poet as the guilty party, we then can read both the spider's false confession, and the jot's denial 'not I' as the poet's confession: I, Robert Graves (which is, of course, the name at the top of the poem). The conflation of innocence and guilt returns us to the idea proposed at the top of

the paper, that Graves's sense of a divided, conflicted self predates the war and probably anticipates the forms of expression shellshock would assume.

So, let's be careful when we ascribe explanatory power to shellshock, and look askance at anyone who interprets a poem as 'therapeutic'; and understand shellshock is not incommensurable, and that it is only metaphorically the source of inspiration that Graves at age twenty-nine equivocally described it as being, merely a complication, or a way of thinking about the ineffable, the sacred, or what he would later call 'poetic truth'.

## Postscript

The foregoing analyses rest on the assumption that criticism is free to interpret a poem in ways that are compelling or at least amusing, and internally consistent though not necessarily comfortable with certain 'facts' about the poem that might be traditionally thought to direct interpretation. For example, because the name 'Robert' is written at the top of the page, I have interpreted the poem as if it were composed exclusively by Robert Graves, and that 'Who Did That' reflects poetic genius resident in a precocious child possessing the character, albeit in embryonic form, of the mature man, and that the mature man possessed the character, in mature form, of the poetic genius resident in the precocious child. But there is a 'fact' about the poem I have taken the liberty of ignoring, which I want to conclude by addressing: the context of its creation.

*The Red Branch Song Book* begins with Amy's poem titled 'The Lost Child', written in couplets, and containing a 'silver moon' as well as a giant – a forerunner of the gnat, perhaps – who beats the lost child (a boy). However, '[t]he giant got tired of this very soon | And left him under the silver moon'. The lost child then beats a retreat. 'I need not say he came home very fast | And was safe in his mother's arms at last.' In some ways the ending is the very

opposite of 'Who Did That', where 'the very big' girl ends up fretting guiltily about her absent mother. The silver moon serving as picturesque decoration in Amy's poem attains to a symbolism of apprehension in Roberty's. Given similarities in form and content, it would seem that 'The Lost Child' served as the exemplum at hand for 'Who Did That'. Other evidence prompts the reasonable speculation that not only Roberty, but all of the children were engaged in writing it.

Take the evidence of handwriting. There seem to be three separate hands at work here. There is a careful hand responsible for line one 'Who did that?' which superficially resembles Amy's handwriting; there is the less careful hand responsible for 'Said' on line two, with the large print 'S', and other details; and a very childish hand responsible for the heavy 'My dears' on line fifteen, the illegible 'fears' on line sixteen, and the chaotic 'Wimbledon' with the extra hump in the 'm', on line nineteen. It's conceivable that Amy started the poem, wrote out the first line (the elegant Upper Case 'W' in 'Who' looks like to the penmanship of 'The Lost Child'), and then gave the *Song Book* to the children, to write lines or couplets, either as they conceived them or as they were called out. But the neatest penmanship is not convincingly Amy's: the characters are rounder, less slanty and condensed than those in 'The Lost Child'. It may be that the situation of writing the poem as a performance dictated that she write differently, perhaps more slowly. However, an obvious, and I think better counter-theory would be that the superior handwriting was Clarissa's, age seven; Rosaleen, age five, would have had the less practiced hand, and Roberty, not yet four, the shakiest. That 'Who Did That' is written in erasable graphite pencil rather than pen inclines me to believe that Amy expected the children to belabour the poem. (Perhaps Graves's first experience writing a poem was also his first rewriting.)

Additionally, evidence suggests that one of the sisters corrected the text at some point. To take two examples: the word 'Wimbledon' seems to have been finished by a surer hand; the

upper case 'T' on line seven has been altered; and the disproportionate comma on five seems to have been added by a heavier pencil. Some words seem to have been added: on line two, 'Said' with a print capital 'S' is in a markedly different style from the rest of the line: the letters slant in different directions (the upper case 'S' seems almost block-printed), and it incorporates a lower case 'a' that is distinct from the 'a' in 'cat'. The cultural trend away from the slanting cursive hand toward a vertical orientation with letters resembling their print counterparts seems to be operating here. Erasure marks appear to be present, too. Also 'into', on that pivotal line nine, seems to have been fixed or tampered with, the 'o' nimbly inserted for clarification. I think it possible some of the words in this second part of the poem could have been Roberty's first stumbling efforts at handwriting. This speculation is prompted by the sudden wildness of the hand, which appears intermittently to the end of the poem; could Robert, possibly absent from the poem until now, suddenly have taken hold and run with it? It's possible that he was inspired by watching his sisters invent couplets or even by the beatings he vicariously suffered in 'The Lost Child'. He may even have been inspired by a spirit of reciprocation: Amy had cast him out into the world to be beaten by a giant, and now he was going to cast her out. Certainly 'the Silver Moon,' which in Amy's poem lacks emphasis capitals, was on his mind.

In addition to the childish brutality of the handwriting, certain mannerisms in 'Who Did That' differ notably from 'The Lost Child'. For example, where Amy's poem repeats 'and' to link together actions, 'Who Did That' uses 'then', which suggests that the children were imitating 'The Lost Child' without Amy's help or with only minimal help, building up the poem as they went along.

Another clue that the children were collaborating can be deduced from a page of short poems that appears a few pages later in the *Song Book*. Each one is headed with one of the children's names, a date ('99'), and the word 'alone'. Although they appear to have

all been transcribed by the same neat hand (making the page resemble a fair-copy rather than an original manuscript), the headings tell us that each poem was a solo effort. Roberty's poem amounts to one couplet, pointing incriminatingly back at 'Who Did That'. 'My fingers are tall | And I put my soapy finger on the wall.' If it was important to designate each poem as the work-product of one child 'alone', this could be because the children had previously written collaboratively, perhaps with some unavoidable tension seeping into the finished poem; now they wanted complete credit for their individual efforts. The name 'Robert' above 'Who Did That' (not 'Robert alone') strongly suggests that he was predominantly responsible for the poem, but not the only author: most likely the most active and enthusiastic of the three. More evidence of multiple-authorship comes in the form of another *Song Book* poem, untitled, written in a childish, uneven, script in blue pencil, bearing the same thematic concerns as 'Who Did That':

I'm in the bog  
Said the big dog,

You don't say that?  
Said the cat.

I'm chasing a hare  
Said the grown-up bear

How hungry I am  
Said the [little?] lamb

I'll give you some food  
For I am not rude [I'm?]

I've got some kippers  
Also some slippers

Look at our pen  
Said the cock & hen

I see some peel  
Said the ~~cross~~slimy~~cross~~ [chubby? | cheeky? |  
clammy?] eel

I am here  
And I'll drink some beer.

A man with a gun  
Then ended the fun.

Following this poem, probably another collaboration, come more verses in blue pencil. While the penmanship is less accomplished than the chief hand (the older, Clarissa's?) of 'Who Did That', and while it could be Robert's, it's probably Rosaleen's, who developed her own interest in poetry, which Clarissa did not.

It's not impossible that Robert was the sole author of 'The Big Dog' (above), but safer to consider it a team effort; (striking out 'slimy' for a more suitable adjective suggests the children used a similar editorial practice in 'Who Did That', but there, as Amy may have directed them, they employed an eraser). Two blue pencil poems immediately following the 'The Big Dog', entitled 'Winter' and 'Spring',<sup>42</sup> demonstrate a richer vocabulary, a greater interest in nature, and an adolescent pensiveness. I'd assign this poem wholly or chiefly to Rosaleen and give principle credit for 'The Big Dog' to Roberty, flush from his triumph with 'Who Did That' and eager to reapply some of the vocabulary and verbal devices that served him well there. His first wholly independent poem (unfinished) written appears to be an unpunctuated couplet headed 'Robert Aug 98' (age 3):

Two little flowers  
In the bowers

Finally, the last entries in *The Red Branch Songbook* are dated much later (e.g. 'Rosaleen, Feb. 3 1905, aged 10'). It would seem that Rosaleen held onto the *Song Book* after the others lost interest and it continued to feed her poetic ambitions. I believe it was she who corrected some of the earlier work. Her upper-case 'T' in 'Scarlet -fever-poem' resembles the upper-case 'T' in the line, 'Then into the room,' in 'Who Did That', further evidence that the neatest hand in the poem is not hers. It may be that Rosaleen made her corrections some six years after the fact, possibly proud of what the siblings had done together, and recollecting the fun they had that long-ago day in her lost childhood when Amy put away the book of nursery rhymes, demonstrated that Alfred need not be the only poet in the family, and insisted that they, too, could write a poem. In which case, the final answer to 'Who Did That' would be . . .



Page from *Red Branch Songbook* (The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

**Michael Joseph** is the editor of *Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society*.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, *On English Poetry* (New York: Knopf, 1922), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Fish famously wrote, ‘An interpreter of poems doesn’t decode them, he creates them.’ Stanley Fish, ‘How to Recognize a Poem When You See One’, in *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 322-337; Peter Howarth, ‘Electroplated Fish Knife’, *London Review of Books* 37.9 (7 May 2015), 33–35.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Joseph, ‘Poetic Nonsense: Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* and Children’s Poetry’, *Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society* 3 (2013), 675-677.

<sup>4</sup> Here I’m boastfully presuming my reading of ‘Allie’ is commonly accepted. Nonetheless, I think I have presented a convincing argument for it and will just cite it here. Michael Joseph, “‘Allie’” and the Lost War’, *The Lion and the Unicorn* 41 (April 2017), 250-268.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Graves, *On English Poetry* (New York: Knopf, 1922), p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Graves to Edward Marsh 24 February 1915. Berg Collection, New York Public Library; The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, Robert Graves Copyright Trust, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/3088/2632> [accessed 4 January 2020]

<sup>7</sup> Carter describes the dilemma aptly in his description of Graves as someone ‘who will neither return to his country of origin nor become fully absorbed into his country of adoption’. D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 46-47.

<sup>8</sup> When he became unwell in his early eighties, Graves would frequently sink into silent contemplation which he would interrupt by asserting to anyone who happened to be around, ‘I’ve killed many men.’ I observed this sad behaviour repeatedly in August 1977. Once I asked him when had he killed many men, and, after a moment, he replied ‘last week’.

---

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of displacement in Graves's work and his interpretive agnosticism, see my "'Like Snow in a Dark Night': Exile and Displacement in the Poetics of Robert Graves", *Book 2.0*, 8 (2018), 43-60.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Day, for example, asserts that after 1918 Graves believed poetry would be 'a therapeutic measure for the many psychological disturbances that war had brought him', and thus wrote 'self-consciously childlike and bucolic poems, to escape' the disturbances of war-trauma. Douglas Day, *Swifter than Reason* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. xv. Graves takes pains, in *On English Poetry*, and elsewhere to argue the opposite. Charles Mundy notes, 'All of Graves's early war collections combine experience of war with life beyond it, and yet rather than this being [...] somehow compensatory or untruthful or deliberately ameliorative, it is precisely this grotesque proximity that frequently points up war's horror more clearly.' *War Poems* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 2016), p. 34. Though perhaps whether the aim was to contrast 'life beyond' the war with the war in order to reinforce the horror of war, or for some more abstract and poetic purpose, is to be contemplated on a case by case basis.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Graves, *Meaning of Dreams* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1924), p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Frank L. Kersnowski, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), pp. 64, 145.

<sup>13</sup> *Meaning of Dreams*, pp. 166-67.

<sup>14</sup> Discussing an untitled war poem that Graves wrote to Siegfried Sassoon, in which Graves's double speculates about the existence of Sassoon's double, a replacement-Sassoon that impersonates a real-Sassoon actually killed in battle, Mundy writes, 'These are not so much questions of identity as expressions of the uncertainty of knowing anything for sure again, about oneself, or about others; expressions of fracture and discontinuity even where things might appear to be normal' (*War Poems*, 41). I don't quite see the distinction. The poem seems to have an overriding concern for the self, the glass that gathers the light of experience; but whether a fractured identity precedes a fractured world or the reverse seems likely to be a chicken and egg question; the salient point is the poem, with its ability integrate logic and illogic, serves to transcend the irreconcilable facts – whether of the world or the self.

---

<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1925), p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> *On English Poetry*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic: 1895-1926* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to Good-bye to All That, 1895-1929*. Uncorrected Proof (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> This story pairs nicely with ‘The Sweet-Shop Round the Corner’, a poem Graves published in *Collected Poems 1965*, that tells of a child ‘dreaming along a crowded street’ who absent-mindedly drops his mother’s hand and grasps that of an old woman instead, without noticing. Impetuously, he drags her into a candy store reminiscent of the gingerbread house in the Grimm Brothers story of ‘Hansel and Gretel’; only then does he realize that he no longer holds the hand of his mother, but a woman described as having lean legs and a patched skirt, tousled, grey hair and long shoes – a paradigmatic fairy tale witch. In bewilderment, he asks “‘O Mother, are you dead?’”. The dreamlike transformation of mother into witch (mythopoesis) is experienced as sudden and baffling (*On English Poetry*, p. 121). The two opposing mothers thus represent both the split personality of the child projected outward, and the split reality, dream and waking. In *On English Poetry*, Graves compares the split as a rapid transition or superposition of images that epitomizes poetry: ‘One image starts a sentence, another image succeeds and finishes it, almost, but the first reappears and has the last word. The result is poetry – or nonsense’ (p. 121). So, at age seventy, Graves is still faithful to the *coincidentia oppositorum* – of trauma and poetry and to his earliest poetic intuitions.

<sup>20</sup> *The Assault Heroic 1895-1926*, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> The appearance of ‘Robert’ at the head of his poem prompted RP Graves to ascribe authorship to Robert, which I am accepting here provisionally.

<sup>22</sup> Graves’s sense of the co-identity of cure and disease, as well as his express fear of losing his poetic force by being cured of shell-shock may remind us of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147, in which the lovesick poet says: ‘My love is as a fever, longing still | For that which longer nurseth the disease’.

<sup>23</sup> Bob Stewart and R. J. Stewart, *Where is St. George? Pagan Imagery in English Folksong* (Bradford-on-Avon: Moonraker Press, 1977); Bronwen Forbes, *Make Merry in Step and Song: A Season Treasury of Music, Mummer's Plays & Celebrations in the English Folk Tradition* (Woodbury MN: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Beginning with his *Collected Poems 1955*, Graves would refer to being 'fair' to his 'younger and middle selves' when talking about preserving earlier poems (New York: Doubleday, 1955), p. xi.

<sup>25</sup> R.P. Graves joins lines 9-10, and 11-12, to make the quatrain a couplet, perhaps inferring intent from the indentation of lines 10 and 12. However, it seems more likely the indentation is meant to call attention to the departure from the previous structure, to mark the introduction of something new, just as the first line, which is similarly indented, introduces the poem. Lines in Amy's 'The Lost Child' are very long and written out over two lines but conceived as single lines. But the sense of the line as well as the placement of the words in 'Who Did That' argue the two are meant to be two.

<sup>26</sup> The handwriting shows that 'where' was part of the original line, although possibly inscribed or corrected in a different hand and a sharper pencil.

<sup>27</sup> Alice was on Graves's mind in the twenties. In addition to publishing a poem, 'Alice' in 1925, he discussed Alice in several places in *On English Poetry*. He references the Duchess's baby turning into a pig in *Alice in Wonderland*, and the White Queen in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* turning into an old sheep, as instances of the 'sudden and baffling manner' in which dream characters are always changing, a staple of 'dream-machinery' that he uses to defend himself against the accusation (he levels at himself!) of suffering a 'multiple personality' disorder, since dreams are the foundation of poetry (p. 121). There is also a trail of *Alice in Wonderland* in the opening couplet here: 'Who did that | Said the cat', echoes the lines Alice repeats as she falls down the rabbit hole, 'Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats'?

<sup>28</sup> Carter, p. 145.

<sup>29</sup> The mythic battle between robin and wren symbolizing the old year and the new is woven into Graves's *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar Straus and Cudahy, 1948), pp. 76, 154, 261, 330, et passim.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 141.

<sup>31</sup> Christiane Neuhaus, Thomas R. Knösche, Angela D Friederici. 'Effects of Musical Expertise and Boundary Markers on Phrase Perceptions in Music', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 18, (2006), 472-493.

<sup>32</sup> The girl's mother abandoning her for Wimbledon is conspicuously unmotherly. A reader might wonder whether she is stepping out for sketchy purposes, disdaining her matronly obligations, like the young mother in the first two stanzas of 'Vain and Careless', originally published in 1918 as 'Careless Lady', another nursery rhyme:

Lady, lovely lady,  
Careless and gay!  
Once when a beggar called  
She gave her child away.

The beggar took the baby,  
Wrapped it in a shawl,  
'Bring her back', the lady said,  
'Next time you call'.

Here, the casualness with which the mother treats the child – and perhaps the child's regression into a 'baby' – again echoes Lewis Carroll.

<sup>33</sup> In 'The Face in the Mirror', to take one example of a later poem with a similar device, the scars and other marks of age visible on the mirrored face are erased by poetic inspiration. For the moon poet, age drops away.

<sup>34</sup> In his diary, Alfred Graves notes that Robert had written about 'the dangerous clear light of an evil-looking moon', in a letter mailed at the end of August (31 August 1915). Helen McPhail and Philip Guest, *Sassoon & Graves: On the Trail of the Poets of the Great War: Graves and Sassoon* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Leo Cooper, 2001), p. 43. *Good-bye to All That, an Autobiography: Original Edn*, ed. and annotated by Fran Brearton (London: Penguin Books, 2014, [1929]), pp. 179-181; 'Robert Graves Shows His Courage, but Hates the Moon', <<http://www.acenturyback.com/2015/08/>> [accessed 22 September 2019]; *The Assault Heroic*, p. 131. 'I Hate the Moon' is another of Graves's suppressed war poems.

<sup>35</sup> *War Poems*, pp. 76-78.

<sup>36</sup> *On English Poetry*, p. 68; Carter etches over this admission in saying ‘Graves exploits the world of childhood – its irrational fears, its intensities, its secretiveness – to create the atmosphere wherein the murder is committed’ (Carter, p. 166).

<sup>37</sup> Graves posits the same dialectic in a later dream poem, ‘Gratitude for Nightmare’ (1955): nightmare in the person of a ‘shag demon’, on one hand, and on the other, the dreadful emptiness of infantilizing material comfort, the profane world beyond the reach of The White Goddess.

<sup>38</sup> An older Robert Graves might have reminded readers that to ‘wimble’ meant ‘To pierce with or as with a wimble; to make (a hole) with a wimble’.

<sup>39</sup> The co-identity of murder and poetry reoccurs later in *Poetic Unreason*:

I would suggest as a simple test for whether a poem is to be regarded as Romantic as opposed to Classical the question, ‘What is the intention’? If the poem shows – to borrow an analogy from a murder charge in the law courts – the malice prepense of the interest intellectually dominant, with the nature of the crime and its consequences fully recognized, then it is Classical even though imaginative phrases are borrowed from previous outburst in the emotional mode – as if one man deliberately, murderously, and with malice prepense, made another man drunk or hypnotized him into crime; if, however, there is as it were no such recognition of the nature of the blow struck or the push given as one entailing murder, but the verdict is one of hot-blooded manslaughter, then it is Romantic poetry, even though intellectual abstractions are borrowed from previous old-blooded cogitations and made to do duty as emotions images, as when in a friendly scuffle a man accidentally pushes his mate into some complicated machinery and gets him torn to pieces. (pp. 153-54)

<sup>40</sup> Brian Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000).

## 42 Winter

Now ~~soon~~ the winter has come on  
All the pretty flowers gone  
The leaves have  
Changed from  
Green to red  
The snow is on  
The flower bed.

How dull & short  
In the wintry day  
I wish [the?] winter  
Would not stay  
Christmas day is very nice  
And we may skate  
Upon the ice.

[next page]

## Spring

All the snowdrops now  
Are glowing  
And all their [polished?]  
Leaves are showing

The swallows now  
Have come again  
No Spring flower is  
A [...] bit [vain?]  
Pretty though the  
Flowers are  
Like a god or silver star  
But the tale is finished now  
I heard a dog say  
bow wow wow



# *Poems*



---

*Rachel Hadas*

## THE PATTERN

On the train to the airport a little white dog peeps  
from the tote bag in a woman's lap.  
Once you see the pattern, it recurs:  
origin, journey, wound, and destination,  
journey originating with the wound,  
destination cycling back to journey.  
Band-aid, crutches, cast, that little dog:  
wound we carry with us tenderly  
journeying toward a cure. The destination  
doubles as origin. A tall cupped candle  
shines through two red hands. Interior threshold.  
Journey. Crystal column. Origin.  
Bath of silence where you wash your wound.

## FIRST PERSONS

All those youthful outpourings featuring 'we':  
To whom was I speaking?  
Was 'we' no more than a gesture  
Intending to demonstrate  
That I came coupled,  
That therefore I was desirable  
And no sad solitary?  
For whom was I speaking?  
There must be other things to be than we.  
And yet as one gets older  
The 'I' fades too.  
Even as the shadows of experience lengthen,  
One's core seems less substantial.

Those youthful poems that did not say 'we'  
Spoke as 'I' instead. But who is she?  
I am not a forest nymph, a tree,  
A sibyl or a goddess or a bird.  
I am leaning toward transparency.  
I hope to end as echo of a word.

#### PLUTARCH ON THE PLANE

I'm almost sure I hear  
before we leave the ground  
the man in the seat ahead of mine  
enunciate the name  
'Plutarch' on his cell phone.  
Perhaps a classicist?  
Possibly a professor  
at the university  
in the city we  
are flying toward this January noon.  
Maybe he knew my brother,  
who taught here. Maybe he  
studied in his youth  
with my Plutarch-loving father.  
Nothing would be more likely.  
The world shrinks steadily,  
or time, turned palpable,  
pulls people toward each other.  
As we file down the aisle,  
I could easily speak to him.  
Feebly or discreetly  
or for some other reason,  
I let the moment go,  
and we get off the plane.

---

*JonArno Lawson*

## THE ROOM THEY HADN'T LEFT FOR HER

They kept counting her out  
it seemed inconvenient to credit her  
it wasn't really  
but they'd invested in the notion  
that there wasn't room for her  
there was room  
but they'd painted themselves into a corner  
in which there was no room for her  
they hadn't even used real paint  
the paint was imaginary  
but the corner where they found themselves was real  
though it wasn't really  
an inescapable corner  
it just felt that way,  
apparently  
they felt cornered, they said  
and it felt bad – here I'm quoting them –  
'We're in a tight corner!'  
what they hadn't counted on was  
it being for nothing – she was gone  
as soon as they started imagining they were running  
out of room  
because that's when she lost interest,  
and left the room  
they hadn't left for her.

## ELEPHANTS

He brought a small ceramic elephant  
because he knew the man's wife collected elephants.  
She was dead. He knew that, but somehow hadn't taken it into  
account.  
The widowed husband was deeply disturbed by the new elephant.  
How could he welcome a new elephant into his dead wife's  
collection?  
Any collection of trinkets like this is fated to be incomplete,  
but the moment the trinket-collector dies, the collection is  
finished.  
The guest saw at once that he'd made a mistake.  
And even why it was a mistake.  
But it was too late. The man himself was hard to get a gift for.  
What were his interests? It wasn't clear. But the wife, now dead,  
had a clear interest in elephants.  
The man's girlfriend, who had in fact been a friend of the wife's,  
tried to salvage  
the situation. She knew the gift giver had meant no harm.  
He could not even be described as insensitive.  
The new elephant created an unbearable tension.  
It could not be gotten rid of, or accepted.  
The girlfriend picked up the elephant, and carried it to the kitchen,  
away from  
the other elephants while saying 'How thoughtful of you! How  
very thoughtful!'.  
And this took it out of sight, and at the same time acknowledged  
it, and  
somehow it captured the fact that the gift giver was in fact  
thoughtful, though  
he'd made a foolish mistake.  
There was palpable relief at that part of the evening being over,

though not even a minute had passed. The relief evaporated  
quickly as if  
everyone seemed to become aware that the elephant was an omen  
of something worse still on its way,  
and the evening had only just begun.

## FLOWERS

Faded flowers in a fist  
Twisted face that won't untwist  
soberly knotted  
wildly tangled  
the living will leap  
and the dead be dangled.

## BY THE WAY

Words came very far without you and this

by the way

is why you must weigh the words  
in the way you weigh the way  
the way that has weight  
so it can sustain you  
and the words you want  
to entertain you  
must carry such freight  
so that you can remain you.

## About the Poets ◆◆

**Rachel Hadas** is the author of numerous books of poetry, essays, and translations, including *Poems for Camilla* (Measure 2018), *Questions in the Vestibule: Poems* (Triquarterly, 2016); *The River of Forgetfulness* (Wordtech Communications, 2006), and *Halfway Down the Hall: New & Selected Poems* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998). Her poems were first published in *The Golden Road* (Northwestern University Press, 2012)

**JonArno Lawson** is the author of *The Playgrounds of Babel* (Groundwood, 2019), *Over the Rooftops, Under the Moon* (Enchanted Lion, 2019), *But It's So Silly: A Cross-cultural Collage of Nonsense, Play, and Poetry* (Wolsak and Wynn, 2017), *Sidewalk Flowers* (Groundwood, 2015), *Enjoy it While it Hurts* (Wolsak and Wynn, 2013), and other books of poetry and essays for adults and children.

## Deyá's Early Days

*Miriam Frank*

Robert Graves was in his thirty fourth year when he arrived in Deyá for the first time and, charmed by what he found, decided to stay. He was searching for a peaceful haven that could offer the 'perfect tranquility' he needed to recover his peace of mind and the freedom to compose his poetry.

In the preceding years, he had been through some particularly difficult times, including three close brushes with death. In World War One, an exploding German shell at the Battle of the Somme caused him such severe injuries that he was given up for dead. Though eventually he recovered, he was left with shellshock. Then, a few years later, he caught the Spanish flu, nearly dying from the complications. During that period, he was also struggling to make ends meet for his family and himself with his poetry. As he observed: 'There is no money in poetry, but then there is no poetry in money either.'

He found a new muse and lover in the American poet Laura Riding, and encountered his third close call with death when she threw herself out of the window from the fourth floor of their home in London and he jumped after her. They both miraculously survived, but he was now facing a hefty bill for her hospital treatment, followed by another for a private convalescent home she was insisting on attending.

The intense pressure of the situation led Graves to write *Good-bye to All That* in less than three months. The proceeds solved his financial problems and paid for him to say 'goodbye' to his life in Britain, and begin a new life with the tranquility he sought, the southern sun and its warmth for his ailing health, and an affordable lifestyle.

He set off to Spain with Laura Riding. While travelling through France, he met Gertrude Stein who told him about the little-known island of Mallorca where she had just been with Alice B Toklas. It was 1929 when Robert Graves arrived there and made his way along the winding coastal road from Palma to Deyá which appeared in all its unspoilt beauty, nestled in the lower reaches of the great sweep of the Serra de Tramuntana, with its intimate pebbled bay, La Cala, below.



As Robert Graves was settling into his new life in Deyá, my mother, Käte,<sup>1</sup> was in England, helping care for baby Oliver in the home of Lionel and Margaret Penrose. She was following in the footsteps of her friend Seppl, with whom she had remained close since they trained together in paediatric nursing at a children's hospital in Stuttgart.<sup>2</sup> They were leaving behind the growing unrest and warning signs that were becoming increasingly ominous in their native Germany. In London they encountered and befriended a number of members of the Bloomsbury circle. After helping with Oliver, they also cared for Roger when he was born. Following their work with the Penrose family, Käte and Seppl decided to head south for Spain.

My mother would not yet know that this initial departure and relocation from her home in Germany to happier shores would be followed by many more moves throughout her life, from country to country and across oceans and continents. As she settled and resettled in new places, learnt to speak new languages, took on new occupations, and made new friends, the one place she always thought back to and remembered with a deep nostalgia as the happiest, was Deyá. The photo albums bear witness to the idyllic times she and Seppl experienced there. The awe-inspiring mountainous scenery, their small stone house, the trail through the olive groves to the Cala, the young people they came across and

made friends with in those early carefree days, painters, writers and poets who formed part of Robert Graves's milieu and shared their love for the village and its surroundings. She also remembered the friendliness and generosity of the local people who left fruit and flowers for them at their door, while they were hiking through the mountains or swimming and sunbathing in the Cala.



Stepping out of the shadows in Palma

A part of my own prenatal life was also spent there. The suffusion of light from the Mallorcan sun, the sound of goat bells as my mother made her way down to the Cala, and the happy laughter she shared with friends, would surely have penetrated through her abdomen to reach me and imprint themselves in my developing senses and become an integral part of me.

Seppl was soon to meet and marry Hubert von Ranke, a German cousin of Robert Graves.<sup>3</sup> That would bring her closer to the

Graves family and to Deyá, which she would continue visiting in later years from her home in Germany, while my mother's Deyá lived on in her memories and in her album of photographs of the other world.



Deyá, houses across the torrent at Can Pintat



Deyá



Hubert von Ranke



Interior view of Käte and Seppl's residence



View of Deyá church, on top of the hill, and surrounding mountains<sup>4</sup>



Käte Lichtenstein on the way to the Cala



Käte



Deyá, road up from the Clot, with figures



Käte and friend at the Cala



Mallorquin woman



Mallorquin Woman walking under a vine pergola<sup>5</sup>



Lunch, with Ulrich Leman in white, hatless <sup>6</sup>



Road to Palma. Umbrella pine at Sa Pedrissa, with figures



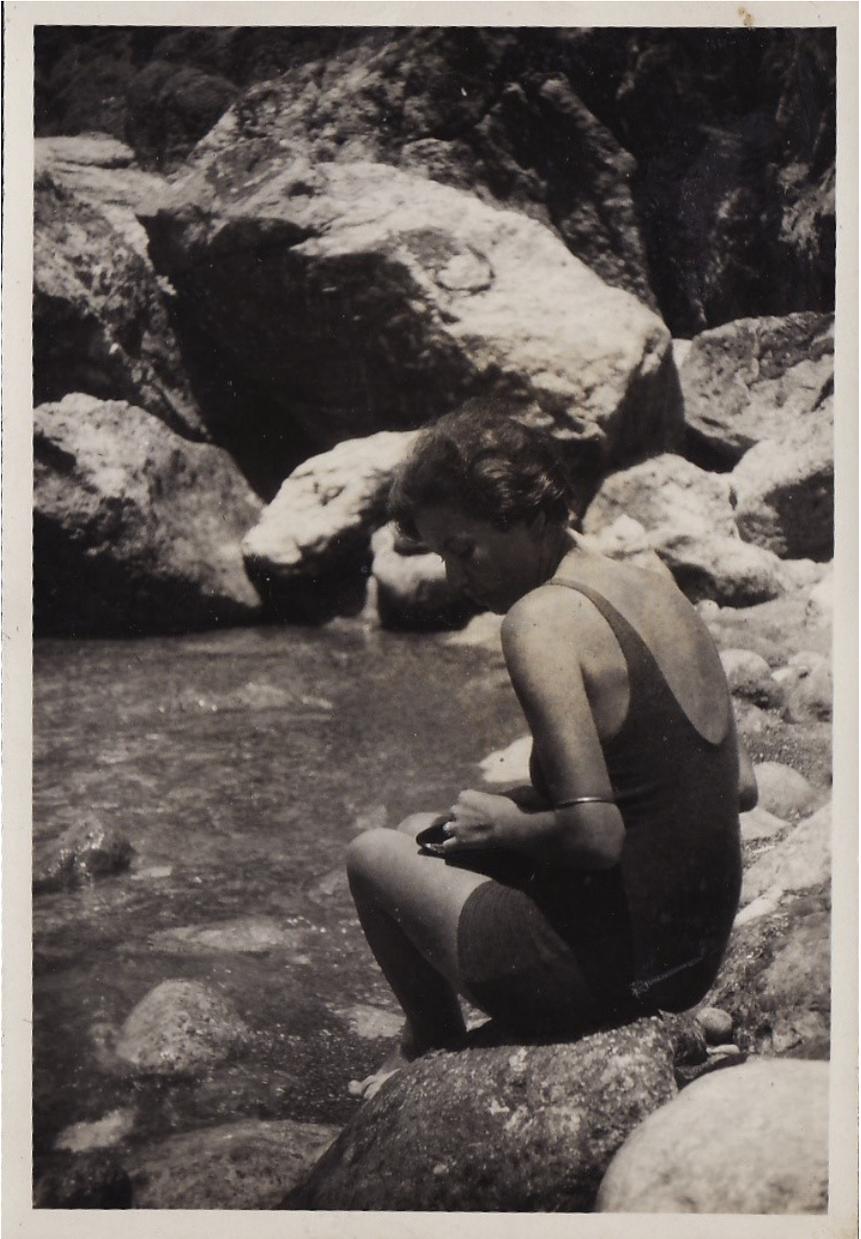
Sa Foradada, Mallorca



Woman reclining on rocks along the coast



Seppi Campalans on stoop of house she shared with Käte in Es Clot



Seppl at the Cala



Seppl with basket passing Mallorquin man in wagon



Seppl at entrance of residence



Sepl on stone wall



Sepl and Hubert Von Ranke in La Floresta, near Barcelona



Seapl in wet sand



Locals left flowers outside residence for Sepl and Käte



The Cala



Kneeling man with small goat



Two men



Josep Fontdevilla painting, on the way to the Cala<sup>7</sup>



Man with army belt and hat



Man on the way to the Cala



Hut at entrance to the Cala



Ancient olive Tree

**Miriam Frank** is the author of numerous books including, *My Innocent Absence*, *Exile on Three Continents* (2016), and *An Unfinished Portrait: Journeys Around My Mother* (2016).

---

### EDITOR'S NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Käte Lichtenstein was born in 1907, and grew up in the town of Chemnitz, in Saxony, the youngest of four siblings in a German Jewish family. Following Hitler's rise to power in the early 1930s, Käte fled to Spain, dividing her time between Barcelona, where she met and married Louis Frank, an American resident, and Deyá, Mallorca. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Käte escaped with her young daughter, Miriam, to France. Käte was a world-traveler, living in Mexico, Germany, New Zealand, and London, and plied many trades –

---

dressmaker, language teacher, and librarian. She died at age 76 in 1984 (Miriam Frank email to the editor, 30 July 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Sepl Campalans née Hermann, also known as Josepha de Campalans, was born in 1907 in Königstein/Taunus. She married a Catalan Socialist politician Rafael Campalans i Puig, who served as the deputy for Barcelona from 1931 until his death in 1933. Sepl worked as a translator of the KPD *Abteilung für Abwehr und Gegnerarbeit* in Barcelona, headed by Hubert von Ranke. See Boris Volodarsky, *Stalin's Agent: The Life and Death of Alexander Orlov* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 253, 629.

<sup>3</sup> Hubert von Ranke, born in Munich in 1902, was one of the top managers of the German Lufthansa in Berlin-Tempelhof. For a period of time he was a dedicated communist recruited to the KPD M-Apparat. During the thirties he worked on various projects for the Communists in Paris and Czechoslovakia, coming to Barcelona with the first Communist volunteers in July 1936. By the end of 1937, he had become disgruntled with the KPD and returned to Paris where he published a brochure about the Spanish Civil War, *Wir im fernen Vaterland geboren: Die Centuria Thälmann*, which, as he would have expected, the KPD leadership sharply criticised. He broke with the Party in 1938 and became an officer in the French army, serving in military intelligence. Fleeing Paris before the Nazi troops, he ended up in Northern Africa. In 1940, after demobilization, he returned to France [but see below] and lived in the unoccupied zone under various aliases, maintaining contact with Gertrude Stein and joining the French Resistance under the nom de guerre Camille in early 1942. After the liberation of France in 1944, he served as an operational officer in the intelligence department of the French Army B under General Delattre de Tassigny, and two years later he was naturalized as a French citizen under the name Jean Hubert de Ranke. Until 1960, he worked as a Bayerischer Rundfunk correspondent in Paris and then in Munich where he died at age 76. His wife Sepl Campalans deposited his memoirs about his early days in Spain in the manuscript collection of the Munich Institute of Contemporary History (Volodarsky, pp. 251-253).

Volodarsky's dates slightly differ from Richard Perceval Graves's, which place von Ranke's return to Paris not in 1940, but 1938. (1938-1940 covered the time von Ranke worked for French intelligence,

---

according to Volodarsky.) By January 1946, von Ranke was in a state approaching destitution forcing him to write a letter to Robert Graves, the nephew of his father, Harry (Amy von Ranke's brother), asking for help, which Graves was ready to offer. Jenny, Graves's daughter, helped to navigate the difficulties of getting the payment across the channel. See Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess: 1940-1985* (London: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 111-113.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from high in the hills probably above Canellun (The Graves house) (William Graves email to the editor, 7 March 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The house to her right may have been the one that Robert Graves and Laura Riding rented when they arrived in Deyá (WG, 7 March 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Ulrich Leman was a German painter who first traveled to Mallorca in the twenties and settled in Deyá in or about 1930. There is a story that when Robert Graves arrived in Deyá, he and Leman became friends until falling out over a game of chess. The Spanish Civil War drove him, like Graves, from the island. Returning to Germany, he remained there for the following twenty years. He spent the next twenty-five years shuttling between Deyá and Germany and then resettled in Deyá in 1983 where he created a household with Joseph Fontdevilla, also called 'Pep Pelat', another painter who specialized in flowers and landscapes, and their friend Roberto (from Aragón), completed by numerous cats. His love of the geography and culture of the island is reflected in his many landscapes, seascapes, processions, folkloric dances, still lifes and religious paintings. Ulrich died in 1988 and he is buried in the cemetery in Deyá. ('Ulrich Leman' *Wikipedia*

<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrich\\_Leman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrich_Leman)> [accessed 12 May 2020]; 'Ulrich Leman', *CafeCody*

<<http://www.cafecody.com/deya/painters/ulrich.html>> [accessed 12 May 2020]; William Graves email to the editor, 5 March 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Fontdevilla, affectionately named 'Pepe', was a painter who arrived in Deyá in 1934 and rented Sa Siqui. He met and lived with Ulrich Leman who, vacating Mallorca when the Spanish Civil War began, deeded his house to him. They lived together when Ulrich returned. See 'Painters and Artists, *Deyá Heydays*

<<https://deiaheydays.com/painters-artists/#f>> [Accessed 15 May 2020]; WG email to editor 15 May 2020.





Cecil Woolf

## **Cecil James Sidney Woolf (1927-2019)**

*Jean Moorcroft Wilson*

It is impossible to do justice to such a many-sided man as Cecil, who died at the age of 92 on 10 June 2019. But I shall try to give you at least a flavour of his long life and his many interests. Cecil was born in Waddesdon, Buckinghamshire on 20 February 1927 and grew up in the country there. And though he spent the greater part of his life in London, he remained a countryman at heart, even after he left home for boarding-school at the tender age of six, first the Dragon Prep School in Oxford, then Stowe. To be with him in the country was a revelation.

As his schooldays revealed, Cecil had an exceptional mind, not only taking the equivalent of A-levels a year early, for example, but also gaining top marks in the whole country in the English Literature paper. This was during the Second World War, however, and instead of going on to Oxford or Cambridge as expected, he enlisted in the Army at the age of sixteen. Entering as a private in the tank regiment, he was quickly promoted to the rank of captain, fighting in the tail-end of the War in Italy, where he promptly learnt to speak fluent Italian ('It's so like Latin', he would explain modestly) and Palestine. Italy, Venice in particular, became for him the 'great good place'.

After demobilisation in 1947, Cecil joined the stockbroking firm of Woolf, Christie, founded by two of his childless uncles, who wanted him to carry on the family business. Though he rapidly mastered the various branches of the trade, he left after only a few years to start his own antiquarian book business, willingly forfeiting the guaranteed money and security of his city job for the challenges and independence he anticipated as a freelance writer and bookseller. It was typical of him that, though his aunt, Virginia Woolf was becoming recognized as one of Britain's greatest novelists by the nineteen-fifties and -sixties he never

traded on his relationship to her and remained modest and unassuming throughout his life, almost to a fault.

Likewise, though he had grown up in a house built by Cardinal Wolsey on James de Rothschild's Waddesdon Estate and was related to Jimmy through James's wife, Dorothy, he never boasted of the fact or used it to his advantage. And he never tried for popular fame, though he was clever enough to do so; he preferred a less obvious route. As a writer, his bibliographies of Noman Douglas and Baron Corvo, together with his editions of Corvo's novels, short stories, poems and letters are models of their kind.

The same year that Cecil mounted a highly successful Corvo exhibition, 1960, he also founded his own publishing house, inspired undoubtedly by the example of his aunt and uncle, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, whom he had helped at the Hogarth Press from an early age. His encouragement of young, and not-so-young, writers, like Leonard's, became legendary. (Without Cecil's belief and encouragement, I doubt whether I, for instance, would have dared to have faith in myself as a writer.) A list of the books Cecil published in those early days shows how eclectic yet wide-ranging his tastes were and how creative and pro-active he was:

– When he got to know Colin Wilson in the old Reading Room of the British Museum shortly after the success of Wilson's *The Outsider* (1956), for example, he suggested that, young as he was, he should write his autobiography and Wilson's *Voyage to a Beginning* became one of Cecil Woolf Publishers early hits.<sup>1</sup>

– And he nursed Quentin Crisp with endless crates of Guinness through the conceiving and writing of the book which followed Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), i.e. *How to Have a Life Style* another bestseller which went into at least four editions and became a one-man show.<sup>2</sup>

– There were also more scholarly books, such as 'William Morris', Joyce Tompkins's masterly 'approach to Morris's poetry',<sup>3</sup> or Harold Brook's 'T.S. Eliot as Literary Critic',<sup>4</sup> or an edition of J.M. Barrie's unpublished play, 'Ibsen's Ghost',<sup>5</sup> as well

as biographies of Isaac Rosenberg and Charles Hamilton Sorley and editions of their poetry and letters.<sup>6</sup>

– His own edition of Corvo's *Venice Letters* was one of the Press's greatest successes of this period.<sup>7</sup>

As if that weren't enough to keep anyone busy, shortly after we moved in together in the 1970s, our first child, Katie, was born and Cecil became (as the children often called us), 'Mummy/Daddy'. (His greatest boast was that he had changed more nappies than I had!)

Cecil had wanted to call Katie 'Virginia' when she was born – I thought that 'Virginia Woolf' might be something of a burden for a child and it eventually became her second name – but his attitude towards his illustrious aunt and uncle was not entirely straightforward. (He spent our first dinner together telling me how much better D. H. Lawrence was as a novelist than Virginia.) But he was evidently proud of the connection at some level and would later publish one of our most successful series in the Press, the *Bloomsbury Heritage* monographs about the life, work and times of the Bloomsbury Group, Virginia in particular.

Our second child, Philip, was born two years after Katie, while I was working on a biography of Isaac Rosenberg. Cecil had a great admiration for that First World War poet, whose sister, Annie Wynick he had got to know. Like her, he thought Rosenberg shamefully neglected and had promised her that he would publish a biography of her brother. When the author he had commissioned to write it, with his help, took the completed book to a larger publisher, I was so upset for him that I rashly offered to write one for Cecil Woolf Publishers instead. It was the start of my career as a War Poets' biographer, though I didn't know it. It was also the origin of our series on the subject.

Though Cecil came to fatherhood relatively late, he did nothing by halves and an early fiftieth birthday present was our third child, Emma, born two years after Philip.

A third *publishing* child, a little later, would be a third series of

---

monographs, this time on the Powys brothers, with the main focus on John Cowper Powys and editions of some of his letters. As one of the authors and editors of the Powys books, Anthony Head wrote in the Powys Newsletter shortly after Cecil died:

His passing marks the end of a period of publishing in this field that is unlikely ever to be equalled. The Powys Society owes Cecil an enormous debt of gratitude. From the time he began to publish volumes of JCP's letters in the early 1980s, his interest never wavered and where large publishers would steer well clear of them, Cecil was willing to commit the effort and money to publishing letters, diaries, essays, monographs and all sorts, despite their limited popular appeal and the near certainty of financial loss. No other publisher has done more over such a span of time to maintain the profile of the Powyses and encourage interest in them.<sup>8</sup>

The start of the Powys Society Series was sandwiched between our last two children, Alice and Tristram.

The 1980s revealed a quite different side to Cecil, his interest in politics, which resulted in *The Men and Document Series*. When I first met Cecil, he had been co-editing a book for Cape called *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam*, for which, incidentally, he had successfully solicited his uncle Leonard's contribution.<sup>9</sup> It was in part Leonard's own involvement in politics which had influenced Cecil, as well as his friendship as a young man with the writer Nancy Cunard, who had edited *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* in 1937 (to which Leonard also contributed, but not, alas, Graves): a book we re-issued in our own list later.

When the Falklands War broke out in 1982, Cecil asked me if I would edit an *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands* with him. I agreed; well aware of Cecil's leisurely view of time, however, it was with the proviso that we got it out quickly. (In the event, after

an astoundingly large order from W. H. Smith's if we could have it ready in another fortnight, we managed it in three weeks from the completed manuscript to bound copies!) *Authors Take Sides on Iraq and the Gulf War* would follow,<sup>10</sup> and Cecil was working on a projected *Authors Take Sides on Syria* when he died. As Lois Gilmore argues in a paper delivered to the Virginia Woolf Society just days before Cecil's death, *Authors Take Sides* is a significant series, showing how 'a small press claims a neutral space; provides a forum for multiple voices to express opinions about war, peace, and social justice'.

As a direct result of *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands* one of the contributors,<sup>11</sup> the labour politician Tam Dalyell, asked if he could write his own book on the subject and this resulted in three more books in the *Men and Documents* series, Tam's *One Man's Falklands*, *Thatcher's Torpedo*, and *Thatcher: Patterns of Deceit*.<sup>12</sup> The Falklands conflict also spawned three more in the *Men and Documents* series: *The Sinking of the Belgrano* by Diana Gould, *The Death of a Rose-Grower: Who Killed Hilda Morrell* by Graham Smith, and *The Ponting Affair* by Richard Norton-Taylor, about the civil servant Clive Ponting, who had leaked documents on the war to the press.<sup>13</sup>

The last decade of Cecil's life was occupied mostly with his work on the Bloomsbury Heritage and War Poets series and he was delighted to be made an honorary member of both the Robert Graves, as well as the Virginia Woolf societies, in recognition of his efforts. Another unexpected pleasure was a return to a writer he had admired so greatly as a young man, Norman Douglas. He was thrilled to be invited to participate in the *Norman Douglas Symposium* in Bregenz, Austria, every two years until his death.

There are so many other sides to Cecil, so much more to say, but no more time to say it. I am reminded of a scene from Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, in which Thomas Cromwell the great statesman, politician and shrewd businessman, is shown at home with the wife and children he adores. He has just devised some

wondrous fairy-wings for the younger of his two daughters,  
Grace:

The year that Grace was an angel she had wings made of peacock feathers. He himself had contrived it. The other little girls were dowdy goose creatures and their wings fell off if they caught them on the corners of the stable. But Grace stood glittering, her hair entwined with silver threads; her shoulders were trussed with a spreading, shivering glory, and the rustling air was perfumed as she breathed. Lizzie [Cromwell's wife] said, 'Thomas, there's no end to you is there?'

The same, I believe, could be said of Cecil.

**Jean Moorcroft Wilson** is the author of numerous biographies, including *Siegfried Sassoon: Soldier, Poet Lover, Friend* (2014), *Edward Thomas: from Adlestrop to Arras* (2015), and *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to Good-bye to All That* (2018).

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Colin Wilson, *Voyage to a Beginning: An Autobiography* (London: Cecil and Amelia Woolf, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Crisp, *How to Have a Life Style* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> J. M. S. Tomkins, *William Morris: An Approach to Poetry* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Harold Fletcher Brooks, *T.S. Eliot as Literary Critic* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> E. M. Barrie, *Ibsen's Ghost: A Play in One Act* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1975).

---

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Rosenberg, *The Selected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed and with an introduction by Jean Moorcroft Wilson (London: Cecil Woolf, 2003); Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Charles Hamilton Sorley: A Biography* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Rolfe, *The Venice Letters*, ed and with an introduction by Cecil Woolf (London: Cecil & Amelia Woolf, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Head, 'Cecil Woolf, 20 February 1927-10 June 2019', *Powys Society Newsletter* 97 (July 2019), p. 2. <<https://www.powys-society.org/1PDF/NL97contents.pdf>> [accessed 28 June 2020]

<sup>9</sup> *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam: Two Questions on the War in Vietnam Answered by the Authors of Several Nations*, ed by Cecil Woolf and John Bagguley (London: Owen, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> *Authors Take Sides on Iraq and the Gulf War*, ed by Jean Moorcroft Wilson and Cecil Wolf (London: Cecil Woolf, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands*, ed by Jean Moorcroft Wilson and Cecil Woolf (London: Cecil Wolf, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Tam Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1982); Tam Dalyell, *Thatcher's Torpedo: The Sinking of the Belgrano* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1983); Tay Dalyell, *Patterns of Deceit*, intro by Paul Rogers. (London: Cecil Woolf, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Diana Gould, *On the Spot: The Sinking of the 'Belgrano'*, intro. By Tam Dalyell (London: Cecil Woolf, 1984); Graham Smith, *Death of a Rose-Grower: Who Killed Hilda Murell?* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985); Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Ponting Affair* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985).



**GRAVESIANA**

*THE JOURNAL OF THE ROBERT GRAVES SOCIETY*

Deadline for submission: 30 April 2021

Soliciting articles for the Summer issue of *Gravesiana*, *The Journal of the Robert Graves Society*, a peer-reviewed journal publishing scholarly articles concerning Robert Graves and topics of related interest. These include early twentieth century poetry, World War I and its ongoing influence, myth and literature, historical fiction, and twentieth century feminisms, criticism relating to Robert Graves and European media, literature and the writing arts, film, music, art and design, drama and dance or fine art, Robert Graves and the politics / aesthetics of illness and trauma. Articles should be between 3500 and 5000 words.

For a style sheet please see

<http://www.robertgraves.org/gravesiana/index.php?id=21>

All *Gravesiana* articles are blind-refereed.

*Gravesiana* is available as an electronic journal at

<http://robertgraves.org/gravesiana>. Readers are encouraged to visit our website and join The Robert Graves Society Facebook page.

Send submissions and/or questions to:

Michael Joseph

Editor, *Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society*

[mjoseph@rutgers.edu](mailto:mjoseph@rutgers.edu)

917 363 8254

