

## Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*

FRAN BREARTON  
*Queen's University, Belfast*

### I

IN THE SPRING OF 1944, Robert Graves was seized by ‘a sudden overwhelming obsession’. ‘I began’, he explains, ‘speculating on a mysterious “Battle of the Trees”, fought in pre-historic Britain, and my mind ran at such a furious rate all night, as well as all the next day, that it was difficult for my pen to keep pace with it. Three weeks later, I had written a seventy-thousand-word book, called *The Roebuck in the Thicket*.<sup>1</sup> The Battle of the Trees, Graves claims, was fought ‘between the White Goddess (“the woman”) for whose love the god of the waxing year and of the waning year were rivals, and “the man”, Immortal Apollo, or Beli, who challenged her power’.<sup>2</sup> The Roebuck’s poetic meaning is, he tells us, ‘Hide the Secret’,<sup>3</sup> and as the book was expanded between 1944 and 1946 into *The White Goddess*, Graves’s chase of ‘the roebuck in the thicket’ became a quest both to uncover the ‘central secret of neolithic and Bronze Age religious faith’—namely ‘the cult of the White Goddess’—and to explore the

Read at the Academy on 11 November 2004.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, ‘Postscript 1960’, *The White Goddess* (3rd edn., London: Faber, 1960), p. 488. First published in 1948, *The White Goddess* was amended and enlarged by Graves in 1952, and again in 1960. Grevel Lindop’s fourth edition (published by Faber in 1999) also incorporates revisions made by Graves after 1960. Given that my concern is, in part, with the reception of *The White Goddess*, and with its place in Graves’s *oeuvre*, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, I have quoted predominantly from the first edition, unless drawing on, and contextualising, material added to later editions.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1948), p. 298.

<sup>3</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 49.

‘persistent survival of this faith among what are loosely called “romantic poets”’.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, he also indicts a contemporary society which has lost sight of its true origins, and which has come to be governed not by the goddess, but by ‘the unholy triumvirate of Pluto god of wealth, Apollo god of science and Mercury god of thieves’.<sup>5</sup> ‘My thesis’, he writes,

is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry—‘true’ in the nostalgic modern sense of ‘the unimprovable original, not a synthetic substitute’. The language was tampered with in late Minoan times when invaders from Central Asia began to substitute patrilineal for matrilineal institutions and remodel or falsify the myths to justify the social changes.<sup>6</sup>

The book’s ‘recovery’ of this forgotten matriarchal origin is thus also a validation of its claim to what Alun Lewis, just before his death in 1944, described in a letter to Graves as ‘the *single* poetic theme of Life and Death . . . the question of what survives of the beloved’.<sup>7</sup> Alongside its ‘historical thesis’, therefore, *The White Goddess* runs an argument about the nature of poetic inspiration, and about the use and function of poetry (‘religious invocation of the Muse’ and ‘the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites’),<sup>8</sup> closing with the assertion that ‘A simple loving declaration: “None greater in the universe than the Triple Goddess!” has been made implicitly or explicitly by all true Muse-poets since poetry began.’<sup>9</sup>

First published in May 1948, *The White Goddess* is a difficult, erudite, and, in scholarly terms, suspect book. It has a toehold in many academic disciplines—anthropology, Celtic studies, literary studies—but real credibility in none of them. Part of its importance, indeed, may lie precisely in its refusal to come to rest in one or other of the academic disciplines, since Graves argues elsewhere that ‘the system of concentrating religious

<sup>4</sup> Robert Graves, ‘The White Goddess’, lecture at the YMHA Center, New York, 1957, repr. in Appendix B, Grevel Lindop (ed.), *The White Goddess* (4th edn., 1997; London: Faber, 1999), p. 492.

<sup>5</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 410. This passage takes on apocalyptic resonance a few years later, and at the beginning of the Cold War: ‘dissension and jealousy rage openly between these three, with Mercury and Pluto blackguarding each other, while Apollo wields the atomic bomb as if it were a thunderbolt’. Graves, *The White Goddess* (2nd edn., London: Faber, 1952), p. 468.

<sup>6</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), pp. 9–10.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Graves, ‘Postscript 1960’, *The White Goddess* (1960), p. 492.

research in University Faculties discourages intellectual honesty and restricts imaginative thinking'.<sup>10</sup> Its obvious intertextual debt is to Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, although Graves's rather more imaginative 'anthropology' sets it at odds with Frazer's rationalism. It brings a number of people to Celtic Studies, and to Welsh literature, but its dubious conclusions are such that it tends to be 'confiscated at the border' of the discipline.<sup>11</sup> It belongs, as much as it belongs anywhere, in an Anglo-Irish Protestant Revival tradition, whose fascination with magic was explored by R. F. Foster in the 1989 Chatterton lecture.<sup>12</sup> Graves sits, if at one remove, in precisely that clerical/professional Irish Protestant class for whom spiritual and occult pursuits went hand in hand with their (problematical) sense of identity in, or in relation to, Ireland. The books he inherited from his Irish antiquarian grandfather and father—P. W. Joyce's *Social History of Ancient Ireland*, R. A. S. Macalister's *Secret Languages of Ireland*, Edward Davies's *Celtic Researches*—and the knowledge of Celticism with which he grew up, were essential to the making of *The White Goddess*. But even if it is inspired in part by his Anglo-Irish Protestant heritage and its concomitant anxieties, it is written in, and speaks to, another time and place—England in the Second World War—as well as to an English tradition of poetry. Following its publication in paperback in 1961, it took on a new, and perhaps unexpected lease of life as something of a cult book: it was—sometimes is—seen as a text with feminist credentials, in its desire for the return of the all-powerful goddess (although from a present-day perspective such arguments are questionable to say the least);<sup>13</sup> and 'found on every good psychedelic bookshelf' in the 1960s it has also been, as Sean O'Brien notes, 'the unwitting progenetrix of a good deal of New Age mystification'.<sup>14</sup>

In the Faber & Faber press release announcing the publication of the fourth edition of Graves's *The White Goddess* in 1999, it seems to be

<sup>10</sup> Robert Graves, Letter to *The Listener*, 23 Sept. 1948, repr. in Appendix A, *The White Goddess* (1999), p. 487.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Constantine, 'The Battle for "The Battle of the Trees"', in Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop (eds.), *Graves and the Goddess* (London, 2003), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> See Foster, 'Protestant Magic: W. B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History', *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London, 1993), pp. 212–32.

<sup>13</sup> 'Magic originates with women', Graves claims in a 1965 Oxford lecture; but the seeming empowerment of this claim is compromised by his argument that magic is then 'extended as a love-gift to man', and that '[t]he concealed purpose of modern university education for women is to drain off the magic'. The mischievous tone here is not untypical of Graves, particularly in relation to gender issues. See Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London, Cassell, 1967), p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Sean O'Brien, 'A muse of fire', review of Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, *The Guardian* 13 Jan. 2001, *Review* p. 10.

the 'New Age' Graves who offers the best marketing chance for the book. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess's* author, is described as the 'bard' of 'an alternative society', as a 'unique figure in British literary life', and as an 'unconventional scholar' fascinated by 'unorthodox religion'. When it comes to Robert Graves the poet, however, we seem to be dealing with someone altogether different, since he is described as 'part of the traditional wing of English poetry'. It is, to say the least, an odd phrase. The alternative bard is also the traditional poet? Recent advocates of a challenging 'experimentalism' in poetry have preferred to attribute to 'tradition' both centrality and an unshakeable confidence. But when tradition has to accommodate Graves, it is suddenly in a rather more embattled flanking position—even, we might say, on the margins. Graves, however 'traditional' he may be, cannot, it seems, be claimed for a literary 'centre' because he is also unorthodox; but his unorthodoxy does not allow him to be placed outside the 'traditional wing'.

The inability to reconcile Graves's apparently traditional poetic style with his unconventional mythological explorations is here fairly crudely in evidence as the publishers are faced with a difficult marketing task. But the paradox—that the 'unconventional' writer is also the 'traditional' one—is hardly without precedent in the critical reception of Graves's work over the last fifty years. When Sean O'Brien asks 'What is it about Robert Graves? He seems hard to place', he is neither the first, nor is he likely to be the last, to puzzle over Robert Graves's 'place' in twentieth-century literature.<sup>15</sup> Literary history, understandably, struggles to accommodate both Robert Graves the First World War Georgian poet and the Robert Graves whose final lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1965 covered such subjects as beat poetry, and the possible virtues of LSD, and whose range of reference runs from Greek myth to Shakespeare to the Animals. From the 1950s onwards, Graves has inspired terminological turmoil: for Lionel Trilling, Graves is a 'first-rate secondary figure' who eventually becomes a 'poet of the first rank', although not a 'great' poet in the manner of Yeats or Eliot.<sup>16</sup> Randall Jarrell concurs: Graves's poems are 'in no sense the work of a great poet', although he is a 'fine poet' who has made himself into an 'extraordinary one'.<sup>17</sup> '[G]ood' but not 'great' is the more concise judgement on

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, 'A muse of fire', p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Lionel Trilling, 'A Ramble on Graves' (1955), *A Gathering of Fugitives* (London, 1957), pp. 21–2.

<sup>17</sup> Randall Jarrell, 'Graves and the White Goddess' (1955–6), *The Third Book of Criticism* (London, 1975), pp. 94–5.

Graves's poetry with which Philip Larkin, albeit reluctantly, found himself in agreement a few years later.<sup>18</sup> Graves himself habitually insisted that he was—and was content to be—a 'minor' poet, an attitude suggestive of a modesty that holds up only until Graves's comments on the woeful inadequacies of most 'major' poets reverse our understanding of what such categories actually mean to him.

That almost every critic of Graves finds it necessary to amplify or qualify their observations about his 'status' is indicative of a broader interpretive difficulty in relation to Graves's poetry. From the 1950s onwards, many critics of Graves's work, respond to a perceived disjunction between what Graves says about poetry, and the kind of poetry he himself writes. He is described, by Trilling, as a poet with 'a passion for the old passions of the temperate zone' whose 'impulse is all against being overwhelmed'.<sup>19</sup> But then how do we reconcile Graves's temperate style with the poet of *The White Goddess* who makes a case for being overwhelmed through 'religious invocation'? There are those for whom it cannot be done. In a highly influential essay on Graves and *The White Goddess*, Jarrell offers a Jungian analysis of Graves as a split personality, one side of him 'dry, matter-of-fact', replacing 'affect' with 'professional technique', the other 'childish, womanly, disorderly, emotional'.<sup>20</sup> The analysis obviates the need to reconcile the two sides; rather, in confirming the existence of 'the double-natured Graves', it presumes disjunction to be a central facet of the Gravesian *oeuvre*. But for Larkin, it remains quite simply 'ironic that Graves, whose view of poetry causes him to speak of "a poem which is moon-magical enough to walk off the page . . . to get under people's skins and into their eyes and throats and heart and marrows . . ." should appear incapable of writing that kind of poem himself'.<sup>21</sup> In the mid-1980s, Anthony Burgess rather more negatively restated what he saw as the problem: 'Never was a literary life so loftily dedicated,' he writes. 'But perhaps', he continues, 'dedication, like patriotism, is not enough.' Graves's 'importance as a poet', for Burgess, still seems to be in doubt. He has not 'modified our attitude to life'; his rhythms are 'flaccid'; his diction tends towards 'obsolete inversion'; he 'does not hug the memory'; and in the end, 'his extravagant rejection of the entire corpus of modern poetry in English . . . put him into a position

<sup>18</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Graves Superior' (1958), in Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Further Requirements*, (London, 2001), p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> Trilling, 'A Ramble on Graves', p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Jarrell, 'Graves and the White Goddess', pp. 107–8.

<sup>21</sup> Larkin, 'Graves Superior', p. 183.

of dangerous eccentricity demanding from his readers a rehabilitation of taste more appropriate to a cultus than to a decent catholicity'.<sup>22</sup>

Burgess is an inept reader of Graves's poetry here, misunderstanding the subtleties of his style. But his comments on 'dangerous eccentricity' warrant further consideration. Graves published his first book of poems, *Over the Brazier*, in 1916, his last—a *Collected Poems*—in 1975, and forty other volumes of verse between those dates. And the poems are, of course, only the tip of the Gravesian iceberg: there are over twenty novels, several works of mythology, numerous books of criticism, classical translations, short stories, even a (never-produced) play. Yet despite being one of the most accomplished, prolific, versatile and popular writers of the twentieth century, his hold on literary history is less than secure. Put bluntly, that Robert Graves might ultimately 'go down in literary history as one of the great English eccentrics' is hardly desirable, but at the moment, neither is it impossible.<sup>23</sup> As with Dylan Thomas, whose premature death in 1953 was followed by an outpouring of myth-making and reminiscence, the Graves legend is in danger of smothering any real consideration of his poetry.

Perhaps this last might seem an odd claim: Graves has both his devoted followers and a large readership (which is not the same thing) worldwide; the ink spilled on the subject of his life and work shows no sign of running dry. But the history of his reception is a complex one, and what I want to suggest is that *The White Goddess* is implicated in the terms of his reception in ways which may be misleading. Graves's poetry generated a flurry of critical activity in the 1950s and 1960s. The poems published between the late 1930s through to his 1959 *Collected Poems*

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Burgess, 'The Magus of Mallorca' (1986), in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Robert Graves* (New York, 1987), pp. 172–3.

<sup>23</sup> The claim appears in Graves's *Irish Times* obituary in 1985. It need hardly be pointed out that in England and America, Graves's eccentricities are more usually attributed to his Irishness, although what form that 'Irishness' takes seems to depend on the purpose it is to serve. For Douglas Day, 'there is no one to match the Irish protestant' for 'concern with chastity' and 'sexual self-consciousness', a peculiar assertion through which he tries to make sense of Graves's complex personality. See Day, *Swifter than Reason: the Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1963), p. 41. As an alternative to the repressed Irish Protestant Graves, we also have the romantic nationalist Graves, who, according to Colin Wilson, '[I]ike so many Celts . . . is incapable of *not* creating literature; his mind is steeped in the romantic tradition and in the love of antiquity'. See Wilson, 'Some Notes on Graves's Prose', *Shenandoah*, 13 (1962), 55–62, p. 56. Others, rather than accepting this somewhat Arnoldian and sentimental view of Celticism, have more sceptically viewed Graves's forays into antiquity and romance as an Irish practical joke, a way of, in Paul Fussell's phrase, 'rebell[ing] against the positivistic pretensions of non-Celts'. See Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, 1975), p. 206.

were—rightly—seen to affirm his importance to the development of twentieth-century British and Irish poetry. Even the most casual glance at the journals and newspapers of the 1950s and 1960s makes evident Graves's centrality to the literary debate of the period. The first full-length study of Graves was published in 1960; the next ten to fifteen years saw the appearance of several others. But over the last thirty years, two trends have become more and more in evidence: first, an increase in biographical interest in Graves; second, a tendency for Gravesian scholarship to become increasingly isolated in the current critical climate.

The first of these is understandable. In the 1957 edition of *Goodbye to All That*, Graves writes: 'Though often asked to publish a continuation of this autobiography which I wrote in 1929 . . . I am always glad to report that little of outstanding autobiographical interest has happened since.'<sup>24</sup> It is a classic Graves understatement, akin to his claim that his was a 'simple, normal . . . life' shared with 'a wide circle of sane and intelligent friends'.<sup>25</sup> The revisions and omissions of the second version of *Goodbye to All That*, most notably the fact that Laura Riding is completely written out of the text, tell a very different story, as they also make the 1957 text the sequel to the first edition that Graves said he would not provide. Far from being uninteresting or merely mundane, Graves's life is, as Anthony Burgess describes it, 'of appalling interest . . . not merely fascinating but filmable'.<sup>26</sup> And, indeed, filmable is what it has turned out to be: '*Poetic Unreason*—the movie', based on Graves's life, is due to go into production in spring 2005. It is, according to the press release, 'a story filled with family drama, rivalry, sex and three wars'.<sup>27</sup> Graves has already generated three biographies—unusual, surely, for one so often described as a 'minor poet'. Martin Seymour-Smith's biography, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, whose focus is on the intersection between the life and the work, appeared in 1982; Richard Perceval Graves's three-volume biography of his uncle, published in the early 1990s, reverts to a family *penchant* for factual accuracy (which Robert Graves, despite his own claims to the contrary, did not share), correcting many of the myths and misconceptions in circulation; and Miranda Seymour's rather more populist biography, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge*, published in Graves's centenary year of 1995, while it has little by way of new material to add to its

<sup>24</sup> Robert Graves, 'Epilogue', *Goodbye to All That* (2nd edn., 1957; London: Penguin, 1960), p. 280. This epilogue replaces the dedicatory epilogue to Laura Riding found in the 1929 edition.

<sup>25</sup> Graves, 'The White Goddess', 1957, Appendix B, *The White Goddess* (1999), p. 492.

<sup>26</sup> Burgess, 'The Magus of Mallorca', p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.poeticunreason.com/>

predecessors, exploits the psychological drama associated with Graves's life to the full. A writer whose reputation was established, first of all, through a best-selling autobiography, it is as if Graves's life has always been public property, and he himself, certainly from the 1950s onwards, a public figure whose 'personality' is the first, sometimes the only, point of interest. More than half the material published on Graves in magazines and journals from the 1950s to the 1970s is biographical; and much of it no more than anecdotal, comprising brief descriptions of conversations with Robert Graves and encounters with Robert Graves, often by people who scarcely knew him. Even the commentary which is not overtly biographical tends towards speculative character analysis; and few of his critics are able to resist telling the tale of their own friendship with Graves.

To claim that Graves studies, outside the biographical, have become increasingly isolated may be more controversial, and to do so is in no sense to decry the usefulness of some of those studies. If the 'appalling interest' of his life contributes to one trend, the sheer scale of Graves's output may be partly responsible for the other, as if entry into the world of Robert Graves is a one-way ticket—and for life. Consequently, most of the recent published work on Graves appears in the journals dedicated solely to Robert Graves, or in conference proceedings that are similarly specialist in focus. Notwithstanding the virtues of the attempt—notably by the Graves Society—to promote critical interest in his work, the risk is always going to be that of preaching to the choir. In the broader field of criticism of twentieth-century Irish and British poetry, Graves, barring the odd fugitive appearance, is too often, and it seems too easily, left out in the cold.

There are several factors at play in this, of which Graves's inability to leave his own poems alone is one. The process of ruthlessly excluding much of his earlier work each time he reissued a *Collected Poems* and of revising many poems that were retained has not helped; nor has the decline in his critical acumen which led him to over-value his later poetic outpouring between 1960 and 1975, a period in which half his poems were written, and when, ironically enough, more ruthless excisions would not have gone amiss. (Only with the recent publication of a (variorum) edition of his complete poems has it become possible to see an *oeuvre* of over one thousand poems, written over a sixty-year period, in its entirety.) But there is more to it than that. Both trends—the biographical, and what we might call the critical isolationist—replicate positions adopted by their subject. It is an obvious point, but it is worth stressing because



Graves appears still to exercise an unusual degree of control over the terms of his own reception. Graves was profoundly interested in the story of his own life; he was also, in later years, profoundly uninterested in his 'place' in literary tradition, taking an evident pride in what he saw as his own isolation from the 'stream of time'.<sup>28</sup> In the Foreword to his *Poems 1938–45* he claims to 'write poems for poets, and satires and grotesques for wits. For people in general I write prose, and am content that they should be unaware that I do anything else. To write poems for other than poets is wasteful.'<sup>29</sup> By the time of the 1951 *Poems and Satires*, that disdain for his readership has been softened somewhat in phrasing, but the essential principles remain intact:

Personally, I have little regard for posterity or, at least, make no attempt to anticipate their literary tastes. Whatever view they may take of my work, say a hundred years hence, must necessarily be a mistaken one, because this is my age, not theirs, and even with my help they will never fully understand it. Can I imagine myself sympathizing with their reasons for selecting this or that poem of mine to print in their anthologies? They may even choose to revive verses which, because I know they are in some way defective, I have done my best to suppress. I write for my contemporaries.

A volume of collected poems should form a sequence of the intenser moments of the poet's spiritual autobiography, moments for which prose is insufficient: as in the ancient Welsh and Irish prose tales the lyric is reserved for the emotional crises. Such an autobiography, by the way, does not always keep chronological step with its historical counterpart: often a poetic event anticipates or succeeds the corresponding physical event by years. . . . It may be some little time before I can be quite certain how much of the present volume forms a relevant part of my story.<sup>30</sup>

That critics have been disinclined to drive a theoretical wedge, or even a thin sheet of paper, between Robert Graves and the speaker of his poems is telling, given the nature of Graves's own beliefs. In the early 1940s poem 'Mid-Winter Waking', Graves writes 'I knew myself once more a poet', a complex phrase that implicates self-knowledge with poetry, autobiography with aesthetics.<sup>31</sup> The apparent distinction between the life and the life in poetry is deliberately obscured by Graves's suggestion that one's autobiography may be written in advance of the facts, or that the 'facts'

<sup>28</sup> Robert Graves, 'Introduction', *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922–1949* (1949; New York: Haskell House, 1970), p. x.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Graves, 'Foreword to *Poems 1938–45*', in Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (eds.), *Complete Poems*, 2 (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), p. 325.

<sup>30</sup> Graves, 'Foreword to *Poems and Satires 1951*', in *Complete Poems*, 2, 345–6.

<sup>31</sup> *Complete Poems*, 2, 139.

themselves can be rewritten over and over again. '[M]y health as a poet', Graves writes in 1938, 'lies in my mistrust of the comfortable point-of-rest.'<sup>32</sup> Since Graves seems determined he will be misunderstood, another way of putting this might be that he has made it harder to hit a moving target. Graves never allowed his own work to stand still for long enough for his reputation to come to rest in a particular place or time. If Gravesian biography is an unstoppable flood, his biographers are merely following the principles outlined by Graves—that one must keep retelling the story; and if his hold on literary history is less than secure, he himself seems wilfully to have cultivated that insecurity. Nor does Graves's own literary criticism endear him to the academy, since his comments on other poets, deliberately controversial as they are, serve to reinforce his position as isolated exile. In the 1954–5 Clark lectures, Graves's iconoclasm in relation to the critical 'idols' of Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Auden and Dylan Thomas was such that it made, as he himself observed in another masterpiece of understatement, 'a lot of people cross'.<sup>33</sup> That iconoclasm is a measure of resistance on Graves's part to any association with the belletrist categories—modernism, the thirties generation, neo-romanticism, the Movement—so convenient to critics. It is not difficult to imagine what Graves would make of a recent comment in *Poetry Review*, in which praise is lavished on a contemporary poet because 'his poems are always in the now of our increasingly speeded-up moment'.<sup>34</sup> The desire to, in Graves's phrase, '*out-zeitgeist* the *zeitgeist*', to live recklessly in the 'forefront of fashion' is something he understands to be a deeply conventional subscription to collective ideology, a curtailment of 'liberty of judgement', rather than an act of rebellion.<sup>35</sup> The rebellious writer, for Graves, is naturally resistant to categorisation in the 'now' of the 'moment', whenever that might be.

<sup>32</sup> Graves, 'Foreword to *Collected Poems (1938)*', *Complete Poems*, 2. 308.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Graves, 'Letter to James Reeves', 8 Nov. 1955, in Paul O'Prey (ed.), *Between Moon and Moon: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1946–1972* (London, 1984), p. 150. See also Graves's lecture 'These Be Your Gods, O Israel!', in *The Crowning Privilege* (1955; London: Penguin, 1959), pp. 132–58.

<sup>34</sup> William Corbett, 'Open All Hours', review of Tom Raworth, *Collected Poems*, *Poetry Review* 93.1 (Spring 2003), 75–6, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle*, p. 160 and *The Crowning Privilege*, p. 132.

## II

Although the Foreword to *Poems and Satires 1951* is muse-free (not a goddess in sight) what we have here is, in miniature, a view of the inside workings of *The White Goddess* (a text he was revising, at the time, for the 1952 edition), which in turn becomes the template for (mis)understanding Robert Graves. Graves claims—since it is *his* spiritual autobiography being told—to be his own ideal reader; all anyone else can do is aspire, with his ‘help’, to the privileged position he holds. He denies that he can ever be understood in the future, whilst in a typical double-bluff setting out the terms by which that ‘misunderstanding’ should take place. It is an extraordinarily controlling perspective, in which even future generations, kept at a distance, must enter his world, and accept his values, not to be able to understand, but to understand properly their inability to do so.

In that process, *The White Goddess* is the bait and the hook: it tempts its readers into believing that there might be a key to understanding the pattern of Graves’s life and work; and, in some cases, into believing that they have found it. *The White Goddess* as autobiography provides a template for Graves’s past and future; it works as a model for reading forwards and backwards. It offers, for instance, a way of reconciling Graves’s enlistment in the First World War with his later *non serviam*, and without the appearance of inconsistency: the ‘pride of “bearing it out even to the edge of doom” that sustains a soldier in the field’, he explains, ‘governs a poet’s service to the Muse’.<sup>36</sup> Its myth-making is easily read as Graves’s affair with Laura Riding, and its traumatic ending, writ large, particularly for those who saw Graves as utterly subservient to Riding in the 1920s and 1930s: his goddess is cruel, capricious, and all powerful, her nests ‘littered with the jaw-bones and entrails of poets’.<sup>37</sup> When he argues that ‘Appollonian’ poets who ‘try to be wholly independent of women . . . fall into sentimental homosexuality’ for which ‘the Goddess takes vengeance’, the historical argument is a scarcely veiled justification of his own first marriage and his retreat from the homoeroticism of some of his First World War soldier-poet friends.<sup>38</sup> The cycles of male sacrifice at the heart of the book’s historical thesis—of the sacred king ‘crucified to the lopped oak’, or of the child burned to death as the king’s ‘annual surrogate’<sup>39</sup>—map onto the story of Graves’s own mistakenly reported death and

<sup>36</sup> Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle*, p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, (1948), p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 391.

<sup>39</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), pp. 115–18.

metaphorical rebirth in World War I, and of his eldest son's death (with the same regiment, the Royal Welch Fusiliers) in World War II. And in what is perhaps the best-known escape clause of *The White Goddess*, the myth legitimates devotion to women outside the tie of marriage: 'The White Goddess', he writes, 'is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual "other woman", and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years.'<sup>40</sup> (So, presumably, the poet has to keep changing his 'other woman'.) By 1960, the point has been worked out in more detail, in a way which pre-empts, even, it seems, pre-determines, Graves's love affairs with the three 'muses' through the last twenty years of his writing life: 'the real, perpetually obsessed Muse-poet distinguishes between the Goddess as manifest in the supreme power, glory, wisdom and love of woman, and the individual woman whom the Goddess may make her instrument for a month, a year, seven years, or even more'.<sup>41</sup> Or, the cynical might add, for as long as the poet's interest in the affair lasts. For Graves 'truth and tidiness are both debts owed by a poet to his readers'.<sup>42</sup> In *The White Goddess*, adherence to the principle of poetic truth certainly tidies up what might otherwise seem a chaotic life. The all-encompassing myth allows Graves to present events that are arbitrary, and behaviour that is inconsistent, as elements in a seamless pattern—supernaturally beyond his own control perhaps, but never out of control *per se*. In that sense, *The White Goddess* exemplifies what Paul de Man terms 'aesthetic ideology', in its subconscious desire to shape what is random into a meaningful structure; moreover, in doing so through myth, both chronology and causality are kept at bay. It is, therefore, as if Graves's life, even before it happens, both converges on, and emanates out of, the mythical structures he has placed at its core. The strategy may be vital to Graves; it is also seductive for his biographers, since at the very least it permits the appearance of order where perhaps there is none.

*The White Goddess* can send literary-critical interpretations in circles too, and in much the same way. As with his life, *The White Goddess* allows for, even encourages, analeptic as well as proleptic readings of his poetry, thereby sending critics back to search for early intimations of the goddess theme in Graves's pre-1940s poetry.<sup>43</sup> Graves is, as noted at the beginning

<sup>40</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 394.

<sup>41</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1960), p. 490.

<sup>42</sup> 'Foreword to *Poems and Satires 1951*', *Complete Poems*, 2, 345.

<sup>43</sup> Graves argues the case for analeptic and proleptic thought in chapter XIX of *The White Goddess*, 'The Number of the Beast'. In the 1960 edition, he adds a brief attack at the close of the chapter on the 'orthodox scholars' who, though they 'cannot refute' the method, 'dare not accept

of this lecture, uncompromising in *The White Goddess* on what he deems to be the use and function of poetry; similarly, in one of the best-known passages from the book, he avers that ‘No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance . . .’.<sup>44</sup> But Graves’s critics—most of them anyway—are not ‘believers’, and certainly not of the new age mystical kind who contribute to a lively internet white goddess culture, with links to the Pagan Federation and Wicca UK. Some are understandably wary that the whole thing might be a ‘monstrous . . . practical joke’,<sup>45</sup> and whether to take him seriously or not has always divided his critics. The obvious comparison is, of course, with W. B. Yeats’s *A Vision*. Yeats does eventually disavow belief in the ‘actual existence’ of his ‘circuits of sun and moon’: ‘if sometimes . . . I have taken such periods literally’, he writes, ‘my reason . . . soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience’.<sup>46</sup> Graves is more evasive: ‘Do I think that poets are literally inspired by the White Goddess? That is an improper question. What would you think, should I ask you if, in your opinion, the Hebrew prophets were literally inspired by God? Whether God is a metaphor or a fact cannot be reasonably argued; let us likewise be discreet on the subject of the Goddess.’<sup>47</sup> The pertinent issue is not whether one ‘believes’ in any of *The White Goddess* or not, but to what extent one believes that *Graves* believes it, or even to what extent one deems Graves’s belief/unbelief to be of relevance in critical interpretation. For Harold Bloom, what he sees as a ‘curious literalism’ in Graves prevents the reader from regarding the goddess as ‘a metaphor for the Gravesian imagination’ and it limits his achievement to that of ‘a good minor poet, despite authentic genius’.<sup>48</sup> And where Graves is accepted as

---

it’. *The White Goddess* (1960), p. 348. Frank Kernowski’s study of Graves’s early poetry is one example of a retrospective quest for the goddess, which sees ‘[a]ll parts of Graves’s life’ as ‘touched by the story that, later, he would say is the only one worth telling’. See Kernowski, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: the Goddess Beckons* (Austin, TX, 2002), p. xiii.

<sup>44</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 393.

<sup>45</sup> D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (1937, 2nd edn., London, 1962), pp. 24–5.

<sup>47</sup> Graves, ‘The White Goddess’, 1957, Appendix B, *The White Goddess* (1999), p. 501.

<sup>48</sup> Harold Bloom, ‘Introduction’, in Bloom (ed.), *Robert Graves*, p. 2. *The White Goddess* seems to be an obvious source for Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, and ironically enough, Bloom’s response to Graves’s *The White Goddess* here echoes the relationship with the precursor outlined in his own theory, since he read the book in 1948 with a sense of ‘enchantment’, but on

being sincere, some strangely deterministic readings of his poetry do emerge. *The White Goddess* is, according to one critic, a ‘manifesto’, an ‘apocalyptic work, written in expectation of a new age and a new divinity—that of the Great Goddess—which would transform civilization and initiate a new world order’; and the ‘Muse poets’ are ‘those who will help the Goddess ascend to power’.<sup>49</sup> Another echoes Graves with the equally uncompromising assertion that: ‘The reader who makes no attempt to understand what the Goddess means to Graves cannot hope to understand his best poetry.’<sup>50</sup>

This is not to project issues onto *The White Goddess* that more properly rest with its readership: after all, one might argue that it is not Graves’s literalism which causes Harold Bloom’s problems as much as Bloom’s own willingness to take Graves’s literalism literally. An over-determined view of Graves’s poetry—one encouraged by Graves—may limit a proper appreciation of his achievement, but cannot limit the achievement itself. That said, *The White Goddess* encourages the problem because it is a book which tries to rehabilitate taste, to anticipate its own reception, and to project any problems with that reception onto the inadequacies of its readership. It is a text which claims, at the outset, to be closed to any less than an ideal reader. In the Foreword he writes:

But it is only fair to warn readers that this remains a very difficult book, as well as a very queer one, to be avoided by anyone with a distracted, tired or rigidly scientific mind. I have not cared to leave out any step in the laborious argument, if only because readers of my recent historical novels have grown a little suspicious of unorthodox conclusions for which the authorities are not always quoted.<sup>51</sup>

Not long after publication of the first edition, the argument is reinforced and developed to the point where Graves’s Majorcan dwelling has become a moral—or at least poetic—high-ground:

---

returning to it in the 1980s found little to commend it, relegating it to a form of ‘Gravesian autobiography’ with only ‘limited authority’. Ibid. pp. 1–3.

<sup>49</sup> Dionysios Psilopoulos, ‘Robert Graves, the Esoteric Tradition, and the New Religion’, in Patrick Quinn (ed.), *New Perspectives on Robert Graves* (London, 1999), pp. 159, 161.

<sup>50</sup> Day, *Swifter than Reason*, p. xiii. Michael Kirkham’s study of Graves, although far more perceptive and balanced, does also take the Goddess’s importance in critical interpretation on trust (rather than critical interpretation itself establishing the importance, or otherwise, of the goddess to the poetry) in such comments as: ‘*New Poems 1962* is the crucial volume for the understanding of the development of Graves’s new faith’—that is, the discovery of his black rather than white goddess. Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (London, 1969), p. 246.

<sup>51</sup> *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 9.

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. Without my brush, namely my contact with urban civilization, all that I write about the White Goddess, the patroness of poets, must read perversely and irrelevantly to such of you as are still geared to the industrial machine, whether directly as workers, managers, traders or advertisers, or indirectly as civil servants, publishers, journalists, schoolmasters or employees of a radio corporation. If you are poets, you will realise that acceptance of my historical thesis commits you to a profession of disloyalty which you will be loath to make; you chose your jobs because they promised to provide you with a steady income and leisure to render the Goddess whom you adore valuable part-time service. Who am I, you will ask, to warn you that she demands either whole-time service or none at all? And do I suggest that you should resign your jobs . . .? No, my brushlessness debars me from offering any practical suggestion. I dare attempt only a historical statement of the problem; how you come to terms with the Goddess is no concern of mine. I do not even know whether you are serious in your poetic profession.<sup>52</sup>

Graves's 'eccentricity' is open to the charge of elitism here because it is profoundly judgemental. His list of professions 'indirectly' geared to 'the industrial machine' constitutes a sly dig at some of the leading British and Irish poets of the time. That he professes not to care whether his readers follow his example by becoming 'nobody's servant' is an age-old seduction technique, and that he pre-empts criticism is a master-stroke. '[H]ow you come to terms with the Goddess is no concern of mine' is a phrase that takes for granted the necessity of doing so, even if Graves does not presume to be able to dictate the method. Those who find *The White Goddess* perverse or irrelevant—that is to say, most people—do so because they lack the capacity for independent judgement; they are mere cogs in a machine, Eliot's crowd flowing over London Bridge. Those who lack his single-minded dedication, tired or distracted by a day at the office, cannot hope to grasp the book's meaning. That he has 'not cared to leave out any step in the laborious argument' might seem a concession to conventional scholarship, if not to the rigidly scientific mind; but be not deceived. *The White Goddess* does not make a clear step-by-step argument, citing authorities along the way. Rather, its structure, as Grevel Lindop has pointed out, contributes significantly to the ways in which the book 'defeats expectation, defies paraphrase, baffles memory'. Lindop,

<sup>52</sup> Graves, 'The Language of Myth: Addenda to *The White Goddess*', *Hudson Review* 4.1 (Spring 1951), 5–21, p. 5. The passage was incorporated, with slight revisions, into the revised Foreword of the second edition of *The White Goddess* in 1952, pp. 14–15.

who edited the fourth edition of the text, worked out what the book was 'actually saying' and the order in which it was said. The answer, he noted, was 'surprising'. Lindop divides the material of the book into three groups: chapters on poetic thought and goddess-worship; chapters which make a historical argument for the primacy of goddess-worship; and chapters of miscellaneous information.<sup>53</sup> The historical argument takes up most of chapters II and III, and chapters V to VIII. But after this point, many readers become bewildered, since the historical argument is dropped at the end of chapter VIII, and not picked up again until chapters XIV and XVI. The detour in between, particularly in chapters X and XI, carries its own problems, since as Harold Bloom has observed, '[n]ot many readers can tolerate the book's interminable speculations on tree-alphabets'.<sup>54</sup> If these do not cause the reader to abandon *The White Goddess*, the long wait that ensues for chapter XXI—the next step in the argument—might do so; after which point, and without explanation, the historical argument is dropped for the remaining six chapters of the book. To compound the problem, Graves 'hides' or 'camouflages' his main conclusions, dropping them in at unexpected moments. The chapter XVI discussion of 'the Holy Unspeakable Name of God', for instance, breaks off abruptly, and not until chapter XXI does Graves suggest his vital, and controversial conclusion—that the unspeakable name of Jehovah was in fact stolen from the Goddess.<sup>55</sup>

Peter Quennell describes Graves as a writer for whom 'two plus two regularly make five or six'.<sup>56</sup> In *The White Goddess*, an understanding of its 'scholarly' conclusions requires, at times, precisely that kind of imaginative mathematics, and in a practical sense, the longer the wait between equation and solution, the more convincing the 'five or six' is likely to be. The structure of *The White Goddess* thus makes the experience of reading it a collusive one. As Lindop writes:

Unless we believe Graves to have worked entirely unconsciously . . . we must assume that he knew, broadly speaking, what he was doing, and that there is (to use a phrase that recurs in *The White Goddess*) a deliberate play of the lapwing

<sup>53</sup> See Grevel Lindop, 'The White Goddess: Sources, Contexts, Meanings', in Firla and Lindop (eds.), *Graves and the Goddess*, pp. 32–3. Lindop provides an appendix (p. 39) which distributes material by topics across the 27 chapters of the book.

<sup>54</sup> Bloom, 'Introduction', in Bloom (ed.), *Robert Graves*, p. 4. That said, other readers, including this one, may agree instead with Carter when he writes that 'it is with mounting excitement that we follow Graves's progress through the riddling maze of the tree-alphabets . . .'. See *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement*, p. 206.

<sup>55</sup> See Lindop, 'The White Goddess: Sources, Contexts, Meanings', pp. 33–4, 39.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Quennell, 'The Multiple Robert Graves', *Horizon*, 4 (1962), 50–5, p. 54.



in all of this [the lapwing's poetic meaning is 'Disguise the secret']:<sup>57</sup> that Graves camouflaged the nature of his most important conclusions in an extremely artful way, putting them on the page for all to see and yet misdirecting the reader's attention in such a way that it was extremely difficult to realize exactly what was being said. As a result, the reader feels and intuits the message but cannot grasp it by processes of rational thinking. In other words, grappling with the book induces in the reader, willy-nilly, a state of poetic trance. Either that, or the reader rejects the book as unreadable.<sup>58</sup>

Graves's strategy here is not, in other words, one designed to share the argument with the greatest number of people; it is a strategy designed to sort out the sheep from the goats among the book's readers. Although *The White Goddess* may be an almost irresistible interpretive tool, it is also, as a result, a deeply problematical one. It creates to an unusual degree a (critically indefensible) situation wherein the poet predetermines the ways in which both his work and life will be understood. It appears to leave little room for manoeuvre between collusion or rejection, almost, it seems, forcing critics of the book into a state of belief or unbelief, poets to the right, non-poets to the left. It is as if there is nothing to say about Graves—either positive or negative—that he has not already pre-empted, and for which the terms of reference have not already been set. As 'The Reader Over my Shoulder' puts it: 'All the saying of things against myself / And for myself I have well done myself'.<sup>59</sup> But it is salutary, perhaps even reassuring, to remember that, as *The White Goddess* itself tells us, the right hand does not always know what the left hand does. Perhaps *The White Goddess*, in other words, is something of a red herring. Perhaps it has another story to tell—even to tired and distracted non-poets and non-believers—in relation to Graves's poetry. At any rate, it is difficult to rid oneself of the suspicion that in tempting his readers into their own quest for the Goddess through the maze of a sixty-year poetic output, and an unusually complicated life, Graves has mischievously forced the scholars into simply another version of the quest for the roebuck in the thicket, for answers that are not there to be found—that he is playing a tortuous methodological game with his readers.

<sup>57</sup> See *The White Goddess* (1948), pp. 48–9. The poetic meaning of the Dog is 'Guard the secret', of the Lapwing, 'Disguise the secret', and of the Roebuck, 'Hide the secret'.

<sup>58</sup> Grevel Lindop, 'The White Goddess: Sources, Contexts, Meanings', p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> *Complete Poems*, 2. 35.

## III

Perhaps, therefore, it is time to propose some counter-‘truths’: Graves is not his own best reader; the ‘Robert Graves’ of the poems is not synonymous with the man; it is not necessary to understand the significance of the goddess in order to read the poetry; and the goddess is not ‘a lovely slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startlingly blue eyes and long fair hair’.<sup>60</sup> Most importantly of all, it is time to suggest a reversal of the traditional *versus* unorthodox scenario with which I began, and propose instead that Graves is in many ways conventional where he is deemed to be most eccentric (between the covers of *The White Goddess*), and unorthodox where he is perceived to be most conventional (in his ‘traditional’ poetic forms and structures).

An early poem, ‘Warning to Children’, from the late 1920s, is instructive in this context. Among other things, ‘Warning to Children’ is a warning about the dangers inherent in an illusory process of self-discovery, a reflection on—and of—the riddle and deception of language and form, and, implicitly, a warning to critics. It is a poem that turns itself inside out, or outside in. With its tail in its mouth and its tongue in its cheek, it takes the reader through what Patrick Keane describes as ‘an image-within-image maze resembling Chinese boxes’:<sup>61</sup>

Blocks of slate enclosing dappled  
 Red and Green, enclosing tawny  
 Yellow nets, enclosing white  
 And black acres of dominoes,  
 Where a neat brown paper parcel  
 Tempts you to untie the string.  
 In the parcel a small island,  
 On the island a large tree,  
 On the tree a husky fruit.  
 Strip the husk and pare the rind off:  
 In the kernel you will see  
 Blocks of slate enclosed by dappled  
 Red and green, enclosed by tawny  
 Yellow nets, enclosed by white  
 And black acres of dominoes . . .<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Patrick J. Keane, *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves* (Columbia, MO, 1980), p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Complete Poems*, 2. 15–16.

The poem is tonally light-hearted, but it is at several removes from the children's nonsense verse it parodies. As with Graves's often underrated early nursery rhyme poems from *Country Sentiment* (1920), 'Warning to Children' exemplifies his mastery of the art which conceals art. It is as if the poem itself is a neat brown paper parcel, defined in shape and structure, one which is, to borrow from the title of another poem, 'all very tidy'—at least on the surface. But its apparent simplicity serves to throw phenomenological certainties into question. The 'world in which you say / You live' destabilises, variously, the world, the individual, and what we 'say'. The discovery of 'truth' is infinitely deferred; language—and, correspondingly, selfhood—are an illusion. The poem chases the point of origin, which is also the point of destination, only to find it always out of reach. It relaxes into more conventional rhythmic patterns of speech at the moment of apparent discovery—'In the parcel a small island, / On the island a large tree'—only to push its reader back into (trochaic) rhythmical constraints: 'Blocks of slate about his head'. With its 'acres of dominoes', its 'small island' and 'large tree', it creates a disturbing, Alice-in-Wonderland world where things grow or shrink, where perceptions are distorted, and where the seeming ordinariness of the everyday can slip almost imperceptibly into the surreality of nightmare. The experience of reading and re-reading the poem replicates the situation it describes. 'Warning to Children' contains the ghostly shadow of the poem that might prove unstoppable—a metaphorical freefall down the rabbit hole of the self. But in pulling itself up short—'leave the string alone!'—it only traps itself in another repeating cycle: the way out of the maze turns out to be another way back into it. The poem sits on a Yeatsian gyre, a to-and-fro pull of negatives and positives, somewhere between what is 'precious only / Endless' or 'endless only / Precious'.

It is a poem which gives some clues about how to read Graves because it is a cautionary tale about false expectations. 'Warning to Children' dares its adult reader to seek out what it simultaneously knows is not there to be found—the 'kernel' in its figurative sense of the core, or the centre of formation. The world will always give words the slip. In that sense, and in spite of the deliberate simplicities of its style—the repetitions, the monosyllabics, the bold primary colours, even the childish nonce words 'muchness' and 'fewness'—the poem plays a theoretically sophisticated game which outmanoeuvres the critical discourse of its time. It is as if the poet is always one step ahead—or behind, which turns out to be the same thing—in the maze of words he has created, an elusive figure who, each time he seems to be neatly compartmentalised in

‘blocks of slate’ or ‘yellow nets’ or packaged in a ‘brown paper parcel’, resists critical enclosure.

*The White Goddess*, which is, as it turns out, serendipitously written halfway through the journey of Graves’s own life, may be an equally elusive—or illusory—‘centre’ of formation, one that sends us forwards and backwards through that life in an endless, circular process that might prove to be our own critical undoing. The chase of the roebuck through the thicket is also a search for the ‘unimprovable original’ which can never be found, only reconstructed and re-imagined as a ‘synthetic substitute’. If the ‘original’ is fragmented or lost, Graves ‘restores’ it; if he feels himself to be pre-empted in originality, as in his deeply problematical relation to W. B. Yeats, he reinvents himself as the poet who has reached further back, behind his precursors, towards the ‘source’ (so in relation to Yeats, he writes that ‘I had felt no compunction about going behind him to literal translations of the Irish texts from which he quarried’).<sup>63</sup> Most outrageously of all, if Graves believes that various socio-political factors prevented the writing of a text as it should have been written, he provides the ‘original’ himself, after the fact. It is for this reason that he ‘improves’ much of Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of English Verse* in his Oxford lectures, writes the ‘real’ *David Copperfield*, ‘restores’ the *Nazarene Gospel*, ‘recovers’ the true meaning of the *Cād Goddeu* and so on. But the process of writing oneself back to the point of origin is, of course, the opposite of what it purports to be—is in fact a process of ‘synthetic’ substitution for something which, in any event, does not exist. The scale of Graves’s literary output is implicated in a paradoxical aesthetic in which fiction upon fiction—creating a kind of palimpsest *oeuvre*—is produced in a perpetual quest that can only, through proliferation of text, move further and further away from a (non-existent) ‘unimprovable original’. (From another point of view, of course, since his ‘original’ is also a fantasy, the greater his distance from it, the more it comes into view.) His compulsive rewriting, of all his own works, and of other people’s, is thus suggestive of nothing so much as the poet knowingly chasing his own tail, and, more to the point, tantalising his readership, as he does so, with the possibility of a journey’s end, even as the process of production—and the nature of language itself—must surely be telling us something different.

In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, from 1927, Graves pioneered a ‘new critical’ method: he is, of course, a significant figure behind William

<sup>63</sup> Graves, *The Crowning Privilege*, p. 134.

Empson in the 1930s.<sup>64</sup> But if a particular kind of formalist reading suggests there is a 'key' to a poem, a moment of enlightenment in which we find a solution to the maze of words, Graves's poems are more often consciously aware of themselves as a series of deceptions. 'The Cool Web', from the mid-1920s, makes the point explicitly. To be without language is to have no 'boundaries' in place between the self and what George Steiner calls 'the monstrous'.<sup>65</sup> The 'dreadful' is, for children, literally unspeakable in this poem:

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.<sup>66</sup>

But if language is, as Steiner describes it, 'the quintessence of our humanity',<sup>67</sup> it is also potentially, for Graves, a de-humanizing deception, one that numbs the senses, throws up an artificial barrier that can only conceal rather than reveal what it purports to describe:

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.

'Retreat from too much joy or too much fear' is in 'The Cool Web' its own kind of living death, as much as it is a stay against death. The 'brininess and volubility' clog the tongue and, in the end, the senses, leaving the poet 'sea-green' incorruptible, but fatally insulated from the world around him. What is 'temperate' in Graves is, this poem suggests, aware of its potential to become merely cold and restrained; but he is conscious also of another possibility—to expose the chaos underlying the illusion of aesthetic and linguistic order; to 'let our tongues lose self-possession', to embrace madness by 'Throwing off language and its watery clasp / Before our death'. (This is partly why the poem influences Auden and Dylan

<sup>64</sup> The first edition of Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1930) carries an acknowledgement that his methodology was derived from Graves's analysis of a Shakespeare sonnet in Riding and Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. A dispute between Empson and Riding in 1939 may be one reason for the removal of this acknowledgement from the second edition. See Miranda Seymour, 'Robert Graves, Laura Riding, and William Empson', *Focus on Robert Graves and His Contemporaries*, 2.2 (Spring 1994), p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> George Steiner, 'Introduction', *George Steiner: A Reader* (London, 1964), p. 14.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Graves, in Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (eds.), *Complete Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 1. 323–4.

<sup>67</sup> Steiner, *A Reader*, p. 14.

Thomas in such stylistically different ways through the 1930s. Derek Mahon's 'The Snow Party', written at another time of social and political crisis, is one obvious inheritor of this poem too.) In 'The Cool Web', words are a fiction by which we live (the possession of language is also 'self-possession'); and, significantly, they create a pattern—a 'web'—which contains, in both senses of the word, fear, cruelty, and the 'overhanging night'. The form of the poem, with its intricate rhythmical pattering, its parallelisms, repetitions, and carefully balanced rhymes—the internal assonantal rhyme in 'overhanging night' and 'soldiers and the fright' is typical of Graves, and typically unobtrusive—thus exemplifies the dilemma at its heart. The conundrum towards which the poem tends, and which, within language, it can never resolve, is such that the poem's accomplished ordering and shaping of language makes it a temporary stopping-place, an illusion held for the moment only. It creates its own 'cool web', meticulously wound round its subject; but the smooth surface and clean lines serve as a deliberately pointed contrast to what is unsaid, or even unsayable.

It is not a poem which immediately brings to mind the later *White Goddess* mythology. Graves's love poems are always going to be the poems whose link to the goddess myth is more transparent. But such poems as 'Warning to Children', and 'The Cool Web', by no means unique in their concerns, are implicated in *The White Goddess* because whatever else it may or may not be, *The White Goddess* is a book about style, language and poetic form whose connections to Graves's prosodic style remain largely unexplored because of the seductiveness of its 'single theme'. Towards the close of one of its source texts, J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Frazer famously describes his anthropological journey as illuminating a 'web of thought', woven of the different threads of magic, religion and science, coloured, respectively, black, red and white.<sup>68</sup> In a 1972 study of the ways in which Graves's *The White Goddess* is shaped by *The Golden Bough*, a slightly strained comparison is made between Frazer's web and the associations of colour in Graves's White Goddess myth.<sup>69</sup> More helpfully, perhaps Frazer's web of thought might be seen in Graves as the working out of that 'cool web of language'. One shift in emphasis from *The Golden Bough* to *The White Goddess* is, of course, from patriarchal to matriarchal: Frazer's fertility god becomes for Graves

<sup>68</sup> James George Frazer, Robert Fraser (ed.), *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890; Oxford, 1994), p. 807.

<sup>69</sup> See John B. Vickery, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (Lincoln, NB, 1972) pp. 38–9.

the spouse of the dominant goddess-queen. But there is also a shift in emphasis from ritual to language. *The White Goddess* hangs together by a thread of linguistic speculation as much as by any sustained 'historical thesis'. It pursues a series of etymological quests, in which the ending is only another beginning, with a slightly terrifying erudition (one that leaves a more recent Oxford Professor of Poetry standing);<sup>70</sup> it makes (arbitrary) connections on the basis of assonance and consonance; it will chase a single name through every possible variation to the point where we may be tempted to say, with Paul de Man, 'No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words'.<sup>71</sup> Graves's 'anthropology' is more often than not about style. The 'spirals' carved on the doorway of the prehistoric site of Newgrange, for instance, are 'double ones: follow the line with your finger from the outside to inside and when you reach the centre, there is the head of another spiral coiled in the reverse direction to take you out of the maze again . . .'. It is, Graves concludes, a pattern which 'typifies death and rebirth'.<sup>72</sup> It is also a pattern imprinted on many of his early poems. The book habitually sets up a puzzle in order to solve it, only to find that either the solution has generated yet another puzzle, or that he has to solve the puzzle in order to be able to set it. Thus, of the *Hanes Taliesin* he writes: 'I could regard the poem as a sort of acrostic composed of twenty or thirty riddles, each of them requiring separate solution; what the combined answers spelt out promised to be a secret worth discovering. But first I had to sort out and reassemble the individual riddles'.<sup>73</sup> The principle here is outlined by Graves as early as *Poetic Unreason*, at which point it is more obviously associated with poetic style than with an 'historical thesis': 'Poetry presupposes a conflict in the poet's mind of which this poem is the expression or the expression of its solution'.<sup>74</sup> Language, he intimates over and over again, plays tricks: what we see on the surface cannot be trusted, because secrets are always hidden in a heavily coded system of signs. In that sense, *The White Goddess* is less a tale of Laura Riding than it is a particular element of Graves's poetic style, with its repetitions, accumulations, conundrums, and etymological fascination, writ large. It is also, as with virtually everything Graves wrote, in a perpetually 'unfinished' condition, requiring, even beyond the grave, a fourth revised edition, always

<sup>70</sup> Compare Paul Muldoon's literary-critical strategies in *To Ireland, I* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. 122.

<sup>72</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 76.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Graves, *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (London; Cecil Palmer, 1925), p. 124.

subject to further emendation. The reader who makes it through to the last chapter of the first edition, 'War in Heaven', finds its 'dying close' akin to starting all over again: 'among the poetic questions I have not answered', writes Graves, is 'Who cleft the Devil's foot?', to answer which 'back I had to go again, weary as I was, to . . . the Battle of the Trees and the poetic problems stated at the beginning of this book'.<sup>75</sup>

#### IV

This is not to reduce *The White Goddess*, or Graves's poetry, to an extended academic tease. Although Graves's style seems at first glance remote from historical trauma, it is far from being so, and for some insight into the problematic nature of language in Graves it is helpful to return to the subject of war, and to two reminiscences of war. The first is from Graves. Questioned about the First World War in a 1971 interview, he described being at home on leave as 'awful because you were with people who didn't understand what this was all about'. 'Didn't you want to tell them?' his interviewer asked. Graves replied 'You couldn't: you can't communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment—ever'.<sup>76</sup> The second is from a veteran of the Second World War, interviewed in 2004 for a BBC documentary on Dunkirk. His recollections of military service in Belgium, prior to the retreat are twofold. Like Graves he remembers noise—and he struggles to communicate it. He also describes something he had never seen before—a naked young woman. To catch sight of her was a moment of stillness and silence amidst noise and confusion; he remembers thinking to himself 'how beautiful women are'.<sup>77</sup>

The eroticism of death implicit in such a memory is not without relevance to understanding the White Goddess mythology that Graves constructs in the 1940s and lives by thereafter. One reason, however, for invoking the memories of an ordinary soldier is to suggest that an idealisation of woman—as a constant symbol of beauty and tranquillity, as fundamentally other to the brutalities of war, as a regenerative, even if

<sup>75</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 401. A more subtle debt to Frazer, suggestive of ways in which Graves's style is integral to his theme, or rather is itself his theme, may be in evidence here. Frazer notes towards the close of *The Golden Bough*, 'as so often happens in the search after truth, if we have answered one question, we have raised many more; if we have followed one track home, we have had to pass by others that opened off it . . .'. p. 804.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 170.

<sup>77</sup> 'The Soldier's Story', BBC, 21 Feb. 2004.



cruel, force—is a fairly typical not an eccentric response to the experience of war. The homoeroticism of a particular strain of First World War poetry is by no means the only story. But of more interest here is the experience of noise, and of an unstoppable noise associated, every moment, with death. That experience shocks Graves's poetic language in ways which, less obvious than T. S. Eliot's 'falling towers' of structure and rhythm, are nonetheless disturbing and pervasive, and which *The White Goddess* helps to identify.

*The White Goddess* is about uncovering poetic secrets; but Graves is a poet, and so it is also about hiding them. The secret it both hides and uncovers—the one which all language tries to hide but cannot—is death. Ceaseless noise stops only with death. Graves's language is on the one hand an unceasing stay against death, a verbal play that never stops, a puzzle that cannot be 'solved', because to do so is 'to go mad . . . and die that way'. But while unceasing sound affirms life, in doing so it remains an insistent reminder of the imminence of death. (The noise that 'never stopped' for Graves did, of course, stop for millions of others, and in one sense it is the 'noise' itself that kills them.) In 'A Private Correspondence on Reality' with Robert Graves, Laura Riding writes that death exercises a 'power of denial' over the 'power of assertion which is life'; it is 'a cancellation of the fallacies to which life tempts us to adhere'. One's consciousness of this means that the two 'approach simultaneity' in which 'our assertions become more and more qualified by the death-negative'.<sup>78</sup> That pull of assertion and denial underpins Graves's style from the 1920s onwards. It is what renders a love poem such as 'Counting the Beats' so extraordinary, where the 'slow heart beats' that pulsate through the poem are simultaneously the 'bleeding to death of time', and where 'wakeful we lie' captures perfectly its sense of both inevitability and resistance. Or we might think of 'She Tells her Love While Half Asleep', where the rhythms of falling snow push against the earth's emergent grass and flowers.<sup>79</sup>

In these poems, as in 'Warning to Children' and 'The Cool Web', their repetitions are central to their effect. With that in mind, Graves's comments on the wartime noise that never stopped might take us back to a passage from *The White Goddess* quoted earlier:

Cerridwen abides. Poetry began in the matriarchal age and derives its magic from the moon, not from the sun. No poet can hope to understand the nature

<sup>78</sup> Robert Graves and Laura Riding, 'From a Private Correspondence on Reality', in Mark Jacobs (ed.), *Essays from Epilogue 1935–37* (Manchester, 2001), p. 176.

<sup>79</sup> *Complete Poems*, 2. 146, 180.

of true poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: 'Kill! kill! kill!' and 'Blood! blood! blood!'.<sup>80</sup>

A little of this kind of writing undoubtedly goes a long way. What has caused the perception of a disjunction between Graves's poetic style and *The White Goddess* is that his poems do not repeat this over-blown, slightly clumsy rhetoric. To find it, we would perhaps have to go to Ted Hughes, whose early poems, in the aftermath of his reading of *The White Goddess* in 1951, are Gravesian, but with added violence. But what Graves's poetic forms understand at the deepest structural level are the implications of the 'monotonous chant of "Kill! kill! kill!" and "Blood! blood! blood!"'.

In his 1927 study of the English ballad, Graves identifies as central to the ballad's effect 'music of a repetitive kind that excites and sustains'. The 'power of the music', he argues, 'lies in subordinating the individuals to the group rhythm . . . [T]he group gets worked up to a fertile creative state, the repetition of the refrain being a spur to further efforts'. To describe the ballad's appeal, he resorts to 'the much-abused word "primitive"'.<sup>81</sup> The 'group-mind' that brought the ballad into being, at the stage in which it was 'everyone's song' and there was no final 'correct text', is, he acknowledges, one that has been lost in the 'bureaucratic administration' of modern society, although he contends that it re-emerged briefly among the soldiers in the shared experience of the First World War.<sup>82</sup>

This early study of the ballad form maps uncannily onto some of the arguments Graves was later to make in *The White Goddess*, as well as onto his own perpetual rewriting; and the literal 'music of a repetitive kind' he identifies in the ballad parallels a central element of his own prosody. ('Rhythmic mesmerism' is how he describes it even earlier, in the 1922 *On English Poetry*.)<sup>83</sup> That element is evident in the repetitions and parallelisms of 'The Cool Web'—'How dreadful . . . How dreadful . . . We spell away . . . We spell away . . . '—devices which are everywhere in the pre-1960 poems. Repetitions at the start of a line, for instance, are the

<sup>80</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 393.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Graves, *The English Ballad: A Short Critical Survey* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), pp. 9, 18, 33.

<sup>82</sup> Graves, *The English Ballad*, pp. 9, 11, 13, 29–30.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Graves, *On English Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1922), p. 13.

single most noticeable feature of Graves's poems from the 1920s to the 1950s, present in over a third of them. (This is without counting the many other rhetorical devices of repetition employed, or those poems where the opening repetition is merely consonantal or assonantal: to begin sequences of lines with 'there, then, the, these', for example, is also habitual.) Graves's repetitions are the 'monotonous chant' and the music which 'excites'. In one sense, repetition stops time; it denies forward movement. But it also evokes inexorable movement, reaching towards a climax all the more disturbing because it never comes: the climax can only fall outside language itself. Repetition thus manifests the pull of assertion and denial at the heart of Graves's aesthetic. And in Graves, repetition can serve as a deliberately crude manifestation of the illusion of order language creates:

The grass was smooth,  
 The wind was delicate,  
 The wit well timed,  
 The limbs well formed,  
 The pictures straight on the wall:  
 It was all very tidy.<sup>84</sup>

As with Walter de la Mare, Graves's employment of a sometimes childlike idiom, of the mnemonic structures of nursery rhyme and ballad, are all the more disturbing because of their play between a surface simplicity (that monotonous chant) and the underlying chaos and terror implied by an insistent 'drumming':

Nobody coming up the road, nobody,  
 Like a tall man in a dark cloak, nobody.  
 Nobody about the house, nobody,  
 Like children creeping up the stairs, nobody . . .<sup>85</sup>

As these poems suggest, he is the obvious, if often unrecognised, precursor of MacNeice's unsettling last poems in the early 1960s. He is also, as is sometimes forgotten, author of some of the outstanding 'free verse' poems of the twentieth century. His poems can combine an imagistic precision and hardness with an extraordinary cumulative rhythmic sense:

To whom else momentarily,  
 To whom else endlessly,  
 But to you, I?

<sup>84</sup> 'It Was All Very Tidy', *Complete Poems*, 2. 30-1.

<sup>85</sup> 'Nobody', *Complete Poems*, 2. 70.

To you who only,  
 To you who mercilessly,  
 To you who lovingly,  
 Plucked out the lie?<sup>86</sup>

Graves's reiterations, his sense of language as something which conceals as much as it reveals, help to explain why his white goddess is, in the poem of that title, 'Sister of the mirage and echo'—illusion and repetition respectively. His poems weave an intricate web of sound, vowels and consonants echoing off each other, as in 'The White Goddess': 'Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips, / With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips'.<sup>87</sup> Language itself is a honey trap, words a web in which we can be caught.

From the early 1960s onwards, when Graves's 'single poetic theme' takes over, the insistent repetitions which give his earlier poems their sometimes sinister quality of apprehension are far less in evidence. This suggests that the inevitability and fatalism inherent in the White Goddess myth are less easily evoked when the myth has become Graves's 'one story and one story only', as if an increasing devotion to the theme has affected his forms in a way that runs counter to the style implied by *The White Goddess*. Ironically enough, Graves risked repeating himself, in the last years of his writing life, to a much greater extent than when he was compulsively drawn to repetitive techniques. But in the three decades up to 1960 which saw the emergence of his best poetry, he writes precisely the kind of poems *The White Goddess* obliquely glosses—most importantly, on the level of style. Graves, in other words, is remarkably consistent in this period, and through the first two editions of *The White Goddess*, in what he says about poetry and the kind of poetry he writes, in ways that some of the later poems and critical writings, so shackled as they are to the myth, may have obscured. Passion is not necessarily synonymous with the kind of Yeatsian rhetoric, or internal quarrel, that Graves tends to avoid. His 'monotonous chant' is suggestive not of dramatic fireworks, but of a more sinister insistence on the inevitability of death. Perhaps the proper word to describe his style is 'uncanny', with its compulsion to repeat, and its underlying fear of a hidden menace. The compulsion and the fear are at the heart of the Goddess myth; more importantly, they have always been present in Graves's forms. As 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' puts it:

<sup>86</sup> 'To Whom Else', *Complete Poems*, 2. 60.

<sup>87</sup> *Complete Poems*, 2. 179.

Water to water, ark again to ark,  
 From woman back to woman:  
 So each new victim treads unfalteringly  
 The never altered circuit of his fate,  
 Bringing twelve peers as witness  
 Both to his starry rise and starry fall.<sup>88</sup>

To suggest, as Larkin did, that Graves, who valued a poetry that could ‘walk off’ the page . . . get under people’s skins’ was not capable of writing that kind of poem himself seems very wide of the mark. It is precisely this poem’s ability to play its drama under the surface, through a complex ‘mirage and echo’ of repetitions and vowel sounds, that makes it get under people’s skins. In the end, surely we might say of Graves what he said of his goddess: that there is ‘nothing promised that is not performed’.

*The White Goddess* can be both a help and a hindrance when it comes to Graves’s life and work. ‘It’s a crazy book’, said Graves in 1959, ‘And I didn’t mean to write it.’<sup>89</sup> It is also, in many ways, a wonderful book. But it can serve as an excuse for failing to give Graves’s poetry the critical attention it deserves. Too often, the shorthand for Graves is the ‘Muse poet’, the poet who, according to Donald Davie in 1973, is ‘insulated from social and political realities’ in a ‘mythological Never-Never Land ruled over by goddesses, white and black’.<sup>90</sup> More recently, the critical *zeitgeist* has tended to advocate a challenging and experimental poetry which, to quote Robert Potts, ‘makes us properly apprehensive . . . leaves us uncertain and having to think twice; makes us unsure if what we understand is what was in any way intended’.<sup>91</sup> Such comments seem uncannily applicable to Graves, and yet his ‘traditional’ ‘Muse-poet’ reputation is such that critics have been disinclined to probe beneath surface assumptions and address the challenges posed by his work. If Graves is neglected now, perhaps it is, depressingly, because the subtleties of his technique are increasingly invisible to a critical audience for whom verse-craft itself has become one of the secrets the lapwing and roebuck hide.

<sup>88</sup> *Complete Poems*, 2. 150–1.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Graves to Patricia Cunningham, 22 Aug. 1959, quoted in Lindop, ‘Introduction’, *The White Goddess* (1999), p. xx.

<sup>90</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London, 1973), p. 102.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Potts, ‘Apprehension’, *Poetry Review* 92.4 (Winter 2002/3), 40–5, p. 44.