

**POETRY, POETICS AND REVISION:
THE EARLY CRITICISM OF ROBERT GRAVES, 1922-1925**

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses primarily on the two books of literary criticism that the British poet Robert Graves (1895-1985) produced in the years immediately following the First World War: *On English Poetry* (1922) and *Poetic Unreason* (1925). Through their direct engagement with contemporary intellectual developments and political realities, these volumes present us with a radically different version of Graves to the apparently a-historical ‘muse-poet’ with whom most readers are familiar. Since Graves himself excised the vast majority of this material from his canon (for precisely this reason), my thesis represents an attempt to recover these ‘lost books’ in order to explore their centrality to both his early poetic development and the evolution of literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth-century.

In particular, I argue that Graves’s early prose not only gives rise to some of his most diverse and searching poetry, it also returns us to his lyric output newly attuned to its, often hidden, theoretical complexities. Without ignoring the crucial role that it played in the formulation of his subsequent poetic theories, I make a case for reading Graves’s post-war criticism as a significant body of work in its own right, thereby challenging the tendency among critics to treat it as nothing more than an ineffective precursor to the more supposedly successful later writings. As a corollary, this study also aims to remind twenty-first century readers that, by incorporating newly available psychoanalytic theories and pioneering the practice of close-reading, Graves’s first prose works made a significant contribution to the rise of modern literary criticism, profoundly influencing major poet-critics like William Empson and John Crowe Ransom.

Chapter 1 is divided into four parts and takes as its focus *On English Poetry*. In addition to establishing Graves’s main theories and their origins in the Romantic tradition, Freudian psychoanalysis and the unstable socio-political climate of post-War Europe, this chapter concerns itself with the

position of Graves's book on the literary historical spectrum of the early 1920s. In Chapter 2, which is arranged over five sections, I explore *Poetic Unreason* and its development of the theories set out in *On English Poetry*. I concentrate specifically on Graves's preoccupation with the themes of analysis and revision, paying particularly close attention to his groundbreaking interpretations of individual lyrics and their relation to his own poetic practice.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| <i>OEP</i> | <i>On English Poetry</i> (London: William Heinemann, 1922) |
| <i>MOD</i> | <i>The Meaning of Dreams</i> (London: Cecil Palmer, 1924) |
| <i>PU</i> | <i>Poetic Unreason and Other Studies</i> (London: Cecil Palmer, 1925) |
| <i>GTAT(29)</i> | <i>Goodbye to All That</i> , (1929; reprint, Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995) |
| <i>GTAT(59)</i> | <i>Goodbye to All That</i> (1957, 2 nd edn; reprint, London: Penguin, 2000) |
| <i>WG</i> | <i>The White Goddess</i> (1948, 4 th edn; reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1999) |
| <i>CA</i> | <i>The Common Asphodel</i> (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949) |
| <i>SL1</i> | <i>In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1914-1946</i> (London: Hutchinson, 1981) |
| <i>CWP</i> | <i>Collected Writings on Poetry</i> (Manchester: Carcanet; Paris: Alyscamps, 1995) |
| <i>CP1</i> | <i>Complete Poems: Volume 1</i> (1995; reprint, Manchester: Carcanet; Paris: Alyscamps Press, 1999) |
| <i>CP2</i> | <i>Complete Poems: Volume 2</i> (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997) |
| <i>CP3</i> | <i>Complete Poems: Volume 3</i> (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999) |

INTRODUCTION

In issue number 27 of *The Chapbook*, dated July 1922, the periodical's editor, Harold Monro, posed three questions 'regarding the necessity, the function, and the form of poetry' to twenty-six contemporary poets and a single anonymous 'plain man'. The questions read as follows:

1. Do you think that poetry is a necessity to modern man?
2. What in modern life is the particular function of poetry as distinguished from other kinds of literature?
3. Do you think there is any chance of verse being eventually displaced by prose, as narrative poetry apparently is being by the novel, and ballads already have been by newspaper reports?¹

The shortest response to these queries is supplied by T. S. Eliot, who answers the first with 'No', the second with 'Takes up less space' and the third with 'It is up to the poets to find something to do in verse which cannot be done in any other form.'² While Eliot's concise, if rather indignant, reply takes up a mere three and a half lines, the longest answer to be elicited from these questions spans approximately three and a half pages. The contributor is Robert Graves and the unusual volubility of his response is explained in the editorial note that precedes it: 'When sending the questions to Mr. Graves the Editor forgot to suggest any limit to the length of his replies. Thus he did not suffer from the restraint of limited space of which some of the other questionees have justifiably complained. Fortunately it is found just possible to print his article in full.'³ If nothing else, this simple oversight on Monro's part proved that Graves not only had a great deal to say about poetry in the early 1920s, but also that, unlike some, he was not averse to saying it.

¹ Harold Monro, 'Three Questions regarding the Necessity, the Function, and the Form of Poetry', *The Chapbook*, 27, July 1922, p.1.

² *Ibid.* p.8.

³ *Ibid.* p.11.

And yet it is Eliot who is remembered as a (perhaps even ‘the’) poet-critic of the immediate post-war period, not Graves. Indeed, if Graves is known as a literary critic at all, it is probably for his collaboration with the American poet Laura Riding on *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) or, more notoriously, for the Clark Lectures (1954-5) in which he denigrates the ‘idols’ of modern poetry, from Yeats to Auden. This study focuses on the two little-known books of criticism that Graves produced in the years following the First World War, *On English Poetry* (1922) and *Poetic Unreason* (1925). By reprinting (and revising) only a fraction of this substantial body of work in *The Common Asphodel* (1949), a volume which quickly became the standard collection of his prose from the early 1920s to the late 1940s, Graves effectively wiped this entire critical episode from his canon. In 1995, as part of Carcanet’s ‘Robert Graves Programme’, Paul O’Prey published a new edition of Graves’s *Collected Writings on Poetry* which, for the most part, repeats *The Common Asphodel*’s truncated selection. As a result, Graves’s first volumes of criticism have remained more or less invisible since their original publication. This disappearing act did not, however, take place over night; it was rather the product of a long process of expurgation that began, ironically enough, with the appearance of the books themselves.

On the evidence of its opening pages, *On English Poetry* appears to be a book intent on erasing itself. The sub-heading alone suggests that this will be a throwaway, tongue-in-cheek exercise, not to be taken too seriously: ‘Being an Irregular Approach to the Psychology of This Art, from Evidence Mainly Subjective’. The apparently makeshift nature of the book is further emphasised by the author’s note, in which Graves writes: ‘These notebook reflections are only offered as being based on the rules which regulate my own work at the moment, for many of which I claim no universal application and have promised no lasting regard.’ Though Graves appears to be happy to credit *On English Poetry* in the short list of past works that appear beneath his name on the title page of *Poetic Unreason*, he makes it clear in his introductory note that *this* book will perform a substantial act of revision: ‘This book was first intended as a sober development of certain wayward notes on poetic development published three years ago in my *On English Poetry*’. Despite expressing his desire to correct the ‘wayward notes’ of his

first prose book, Graves goes on to suggest that the correction itself is not entirely to his liking: ‘the thesis outgrew its title and sobriety and since 1921 has been sitting on my shoulders like a Proteus constantly changing shape; I have cast and re-cast it nine times, and found necessary to write two other books before I could finally get rid of it’. To a greater or lesser extent, then, both *On English Poetry* and *Poetic Unreason* are implicitly introduced as provisional works, subject to revision, if not downright rejection, at a later date. In this respect, they seem to contain the very seeds of their own erasure.

Although Graves maintains that *Poetic Unreason* ‘contained much trivial but also much practical material’⁴ in the original text of his Great War memoir, *Goodbye to All That* (1929), he clearly regards the book as something of a failure: ‘I rewrote it in all nine times, and it was unsatisfactory when finished.’⁵ Interestingly, much of this account is absent in the revised version of *Goodbye* which appeared in 1957. By the time we get to the foreword of Graves’s second *Collected Poems* (1938), however, he has become altogether less forgiving towards his post-war prose: ‘anything worth preserving that I wrote between 1922 and 1926 was written in spite of, rather than by the help of, my new theories’.⁶ As Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward point out in their editorial notes, this particular *Collected Poems* represents ‘the culmination of [Graves’s] literary collaboration with Laura Riding’, who also ‘helped’ with the writing of the introduction.⁷ Given the authority that Riding wielded over more or less everything that Graves produced at this time, it is difficult not to read ‘his’ substantial foreword as a more or less direct expression of her opinions. Indeed, when Graves confesses in that same piece: ‘I tended to make the test of a poem’s worth not its internal coherence and truthfulness but its power to charm a large audience’,⁸ not only does he partly contradict the account he provided of his early criticism in *Goodbye* (where he writes: ‘I regarded poetry as, *first*, a personal cathartic for the poet suffering from some inner conflict, and *then* as a cathartic for readers in a similar conflict’⁹ [emphasis mine]), his words also smack unmistakably of Riding’s ongoing

⁴ *GTAT(29)*, p.291.

⁵ *Ibid.* p.291.

⁶ *CP2*, pp.306-7.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.298.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.306.

⁹ *GTAT(29)*, p.291.

preoccupation with poetic ‘truthfulness’. Furthermore, we can infer from Riding’s long-standing argument with William Empson over her influence (or lack thereof) on his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) that she did not look favourably upon Graves’s first forays into literary criticism. In one letter, for example, she uses words like ‘clumsy’, ‘crude’ and ‘unworthy’¹⁰ to describe his groundbreaking approach to interpretation. It seems almost certain, therefore, that Graves’s wholesale rejection of his own post-war writings in the foreword to his 1938 *Collected Poems* was carried out very much at the behest of Riding, whose opinion still counted for so much at this time.

This brings us back to *The Common Asphodel*, the introduction to which begins with the following sentence: ‘During the “reconstructive” period which followed the First World War I published four short books about poetry, alternating them with collections of poems.’¹¹ Graves’s reference to the shortness of these works is, at least in the case of two of them, curiously misleading. Whereas *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry* (1925) and *Another Future of Poetry* (1926) are both brief enough, at 47 pages and 33 pages respectively, to be classed as pamphlets or extended essays rather than books, *On English Poetry*, at 149 pages, is clearly a full-length study. The volume that sits most uneasily with Graves’s description, however, is *Poetic Unreason* which spans 276 pages and, with the possible exception of *The White Goddess* (1948) – depending on how we classify that notoriously unclassifiable text – ranks as his longest single work of literary criticism. Graves also produced a fifth book during this period entitled *The Meaning of Dreams* (1924), which, though ostensibly written on the subject of psychology, is arguably as much about poetry as anything else (not only does the book contain a chapter headed ‘Dreams and Poetry,’ its original working-title was the very different ‘Conflict and Poetry’). Taken together, these works add up to around 672 pages; 59 of which are reprinted (often in revised form) in *The Common Asphodel*.

Graves’s use of the word ‘short’ to describe his volumes of post-war prose is a telling misnomer, not least because it is symptomatic of the radical shortening that this substantial body of work underwent at the hands of its

¹⁰ John Haffenden, *William Empson: Among the Mandarins, Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.221.

¹¹ *CA*, p.vii.

author-editor. Similarly, the reference in inverted commas to ‘the “reconstructive” period’ in which these books were produced cannot help but draw attention to the fact that, at the midpoint of his career, Graves is engaged in the precarious act of reconstructing his own, already complicated, literary history. Although less than a quarter of *The Common Asphodel* is taken up by Graves’s criticism of the early to mid-1920s, the vast majority of the introduction to that volume is devoted to the difficult subject of those ‘four short books’. Towards the end of this opening chapter Graves sums up his feelings about them in a paragraph which is worth quoting at length:

Re-reading these four books in the reconstructive period which follows the Second World War, I find that my practical observations were, on the whole, sound: mixed up with the unsound theories and written in a less uncertain prose style, are a good many scattered notes and two entire essays which seem worth republishing... My wholehearted devotion to poetry has not altered in the interval, but I no longer use psychological or philosophical terms when writing about it, and for the last twenty-two years 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 to the true Muse, committed on her behalf to continuous personal variations on a single pre-historic, or post-historic, poetic theme; and have thus ceased to feel the frantic strain of swimming against the stream of time.¹²

By locating himself within the context of yet another ‘reconstructive period’, this time the aftermath of the Second World War, Graves highlights the parallels between these two historical moments and their impact upon his development. If we are to believe the above statement, it would seem that a number of interrelated shifts took place in Graves’s thought and work over the course of this twenty-two year ‘interval’: from the historical to the pre or post-historical, from the public to the personal, from the theoretical to the practical and, in a more general sense, from the multifarious to the single. Moreover, Graves’s description of the poet as ‘a servant only to the true Muse’ reminds us that *The Common Asphodel* appeared only a year after the publication of *The White Goddess*. Its contents, therefore, would have been arranged in strict accordance with the idiosyncratic worldview that Graves set out in that volume. As a result, the inclusion of material from Graves’s earlier books in

¹² Ibid. pp. ix-x.

The Common Asphodel almost certainly depended on whether or not that material complied with *The White Goddess's* highly specific vision of the poet's role. The fact that such a small percentage of this work made it past the editorial censor suggests that a great deal of it remained in direct conflict with Graves's newly established muse-poet persona. It is the contention of this thesis that Graves's earliest criticism is significant, on a rudimentary level, precisely because it presents us with a very different poet to the one with whom most readers are familiar.

From the late 1920s onwards, then, Graves promulgated an increasingly disparaging view of his first critical writings, encouraging readers to treat them as a wrong turn or dead end on the otherwise straightforward roadmap of his career. What is perhaps more striking, however, is the willingness among critics to follow Graves's lead, either by skipping over this material altogether or by regarding it solely as an imperfect prototype for the more supposedly successful later writings. Rather than alerting scholars to the ways in which these texts complicate and enrich our understanding of a major, but largely marginalised, twentieth-century poet, Graves's attempts to sweep his own earliest criticism under the carpet have prompted many of his commentators to do the same. In *Robert Graves* (1960), J. M. Cohen provides a rather perfunctory, two-page summary of Graves's first prose works, before concluding (with minimal explanation): 'The poet's practice only rarely conformed to these extreme theories'.¹³ While Daniel Hoffman's *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (1967) contains some highly illuminating passages on Graves's early poetic thought, they generally emphasise the connections, rather than the equally striking discontinuities, that exist between this phase and the poet's later theories. Michael Kirkham also makes a few, fleeting allusions to *On English Poetry* and *Poetic Unreason* in *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (1969), although he generally regards the period spanning from 1916 to 1926 as 'one of confusion' and 'restless experiment'.¹⁴ Nicholas Carter, meanwhile, does not mention either book in his landmark study, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (1988). Nor, for that matter, does Patrick Keane in his excellent

¹³ J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960, rpt 1963), p.10.

¹⁴ Michael Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (London: Athlone Press, 1969), pp.4-5.

extended essay, *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves* (1980). Frank Kersnowki cites Graves's first critical volumes throughout *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons* (2002), but they are seldom given anything more than a passing reference.

Furthermore, as the title of Kersnowski's book suggests, Graves's post-war criticism is often called upon as a precursor to the Goddess myth, rather than as a body of work in its own right.

A slightly more extensive account can be found in Douglas Day's *Swifter than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (1963), which contains a chapter on *On English Poetry* and a chapter on *Poetic Unreason, Contemporary Techniques of Poetry and Another Future of Poetry*. The first of these opens with the unpromising declaration that 'There is in *On English Poetry*... little... that had not been said in the first half of the nineteenth century by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Hazlitt, and Poe'.¹⁵ Though Day concedes that the book will be of interest to literary historians (since it represents the first application of psychoanalytic theory to the criticism of poetry) and to students of Graves (because it contains numerous descriptions of his 'writing techniques'), he nonetheless maintains: 'There is much in it that is trivial, brash, and flippant, and Graves seems often to sacrifice consistency and accuracy for cleverness.'¹⁶ Day supports this claim with a quote from *Goodbye to All That* in which Graves admits that his early prose is 'scrappy' as a result of the 'constant interruptions' he suffered as a young husband and father. The chapter on *Poetic Unreason* and the two short books that followed it also begins dispiritingly, with Day, like Cohen, drawing attention to the apparent 'lack of agreement' between Graves's 'theory and practice',¹⁷ not as a source of critical interest but rather as confirmation that the material in question is unworthy of serious consideration. Once again, Day justifies his position by drawing on Graves's own dismissive comments about the book, citing them as 'perhaps the best evaluation of the work'.¹⁸ He concludes his treatment of *Poetic Unreason* with the summation: 'Graves has

¹⁵ Douglas Day, *Swifter than Reason: the Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p.37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.76.

always been more coherent as a commentator on the literary scene than as a theorist'; a startling observation given the extraordinarily *incoherent* attacks that Graves launched against the modern poetry 'scene' just a few years earlier in his Clark Lectures.

Martin Seymour-Smith supplies what remains, in many ways, the most spirited defence of *On English Poetry* in his critical biography *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (1982):

On English Poetry for all its immaturity is in many ways even now a salutary and lucid book, and although Graves has preserved parts of it, in revised form, in *The Common Asphodel*, it could usefully be reprinted. It contains Graves's view of poetry in embryo, and is invaluable as a young poet's immediate record of his practice – and as a record of the principles that guided him. It is the first book of its time to take a truly psychological approach to poetry, and to make use of modern psychological terms.¹⁹

This resounding praise is followed by a perceptive, six-page outline of the main tenets of the book's argument in which Seymour-Smith highlights the profound influence of Freud, via Rivers, upon Graves's thinking. More unusual still, is Seymour-Smith's keen sense of *On English Poetry*'s context, with references to T. S. Eliot, Herbert Read and other significant post-war figures providing a much-needed reminder that, contrary to most accounts, Graves's volume was *not* written in a literary-historical vacuum. Though he devotes considerably less space to discussing its theories, Seymour-Smith also goes against the Gravesian grain by expressing (albeit more muted) admiration for *Poetic Unreason* which, he claims, 'is not such a bad [book] as Graves thought, for much of its description of the psychological processes attending the creation of poetry remains true'.²⁰

Like Seymour-Smith, Paul O'Prey also finds Graves's rejection of his own early critical writings 'unjustly harsh'.²¹ In contrast with Cohen and Day, who consider these texts to be largely at odds with Graves's lyric output, O'Prey argues, compellingly, that they imbued his poems with a degree of

¹⁹ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1982, rpt 1987), p.97.

²⁰ Ibid. p.120.

²¹ Paul O'Prey 'Captain Graves's Postwar Strategies', *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Patrick J. Quinn (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), p.40.

philosophical rigour that was mostly absent from the earlier work. Not only did this set Graves apart from his more unselfconscious Georgian contemporaries, it also signalled the inception of the exacting, analytical tone that would later become his poetic trademark. Whereas critics like Stan Smith²² and Michael Schmidt²³ attribute the ‘toughening up’ of Graves’s thought and diction to the influence of Laura Riding, O’Prey ascribes it to the critical prose that he produced in the run-up to their partnership:

the close analysis they entailed proved extremely fruitful in terms of his artistic development. His tendency to use his own work as the ‘case history’ for much of his analysis meant that his work was subjected to a rigorous and prolonged self-scrutiny. Alone among the Georgians at this time, his poetry challenges itself and asks itself difficult questions, and from 1925 onwards a new tone is evident as the poetry acquires a searching edge and abandons to a great extent its previous tendency to whimsy and escapism. Controlled emotion and philosophic enquiry were to become permanent characteristics of his mature work, and it is unlikely that they would have been achieved without the preceding process of analysis.²⁴

Despite making a convincing case for viewing *On English Poetry* and *Poetic Unreason* as profoundly enabling works, O’Prey nevertheless has serious reservations about their originality. Just as Douglas Day accuses their author of effectively rehashing the major precepts of English Romanticism, O’Prey argues that, far from proposing a genuinely new theory of poetry, Graves’s post-war prose does little more than repackage traditional lyric values in modern, psychoanalytic terms: ‘although [Graves’s] selective adaptation of modern scientific method to literary analysis... suggested exciting new possibilities, essentially he was pursuing through these studies a conservative agenda in which traditional forms of poetry were to be adapted to the demands

²² Stan Smith describes Laura Riding as ‘a young American poet whose influence affected the transplant to [Graves’s] etiolated Georgian idiom of a tougher, more acerbic transatlantic register’. ‘Lineages of “Modernism”, or, How They Brought the Good News from Nashville to Oxford’, *Miscelanea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, 20, 1999, p.34.

²³ Michael Schmidt observes: ‘In Graves, who loved her, [Riding] had much to work on. His early style is decorated and metaphorical and these “bad” elements had to go. She led him back from the Corinthian, even the Baroque, to the Ionic, the timeless core. She had to get rid of the occasionally wooden diction and help him purge the “superficial contemporaneity and didactic bias” which infected his war poems and some of the subsequent writings.’ *Lives of the Poets* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p.685.

²⁴ Quinn (ed.), *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, p.40.

of a changed society'.²⁵ This idea that Graves employed 'scientific' (and specifically psychoanalytic) methodology purely to give his conventional lyricism new currency in the modernist marketplace seems to me one of the major misconceptions surrounding his early criticism and may explain why O'Prey reprinted so little of it in his edition of the *Collected Writings on Poetry*. It is my intention, in this study, to demonstrate that Graves drew *directly* from psychoanalytic thought, inscribing key Freudian ideas like dream symbolism and secondary elaboration into the very fabric of his poetics. Not only does this engender new ways of reading poetry (and Graves's poetry in particular), it also provides new ways of thinking about poetic inspiration and its relation to the conscious (or not so conscious) process of revision. This claim is partly born out by William Empson's largely forgotten admission that Graves was the sole 'inventor' of the method of literary analysis that gave rise to his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*; a major work that came directly out of the 'exciting new possibilities' that O'Prey finds implied, but ultimately lacking, in Graves's earliest prose.

Contrary to O'Prey's view that *On English Poetry* and *Poetic Unreason* were instrumental in setting Graves's mature poetic voice in motion, Fran Brearton argues that this body of work 'does not prove liberating'²⁶ for the author because it was 'obviously formulated in response to canonical and political judgements'.²⁷ For Brearton, it seems, Graves's early criticism was seriously impaired by the 'insecurity' he felt about 'his own status and role as a poet';²⁸ an insecurity that led him to oscillate indeterminately between the various 'camps' that dominated the post-war literary scene. According to Brearton, Graves's anxious preoccupation with his own position on the map of modern poetry resulted in theories that were 'not confidently drawn'.²⁹ This underlying sense of uncertainty is what distinguishes *Poetic Unreason*, for Brearton, from the more independent, 'confidently drawn' arguments of *The White Goddess*; a text which, she argues, proved profoundly 'liberating' for the poetry that Graves produced

²⁵ Ibid. p.40.

²⁶ Fran Brearton, *The Great War and Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.93.

²⁷ Ibid. p.92.

²⁸ Ibid. p.92.

²⁹ Ibid. p.92.

during and after its composition. From this perspective, *Poetic Unreason's* significance lies primarily in the way it foreshadows 'the methodology and approach' of *The White Goddess*.³⁰ It is precisely this notion of Graves's early prose as a kind of botched practice model for the later writings that I believe needs redressing if we are to engage in a fuller discussion of the role it played in his poetic development.

Brearton takes her bearings, in part, from Michael Kirkham's belief that Graves's pre-1926 work is generally characterised by 'confusion'³¹ and she is undoubtedly correct when she points out that the arguments behind *On English Poetry* and *Poetic Unreason* are 'not confidently drawn'. As we have seen, both books are introduced in peculiarly tentative terms. This, however, seemed to be part of their appeal (and their point) for the American poet-critic John Crowe Ransom who, in a letter to Graves dated 11 July 1922, writes: 'Not your stories nor your prosody take on the hard lines of a demonstration – they are both beautifully casual and inspired. Our great trouble over here is, we are *nouveaux philosophes* – we try to hit off the cosmos every time. Expository and laborious.'³² For Ransom, then, the chief value of Graves's writing lies in its refreshingly provisional nature; a quality lacking, he implies, in the work of his American contemporaries.³³ It is also worth remembering that, when it comes to *The White Goddess*, Graves's conclusions are in many ways *too* confidently drawn and often amount to poetic dogma. Though the Goddess myth did, as Brearton argues, prove liberating for Graves's poetry of the 1940s, it also proved to be, ultimately, the altar upon which he sacrificed his lyric gift. In his review of the first volume of Graves's *Collected Poems* (1995, 1999), which covers the period spanning from 1916 to 1927, Rikky Rooksby makes a forceful case for keeping the Goddess and her impact in perspective:

Posterity is unlikely to agree with Graves that his best poems were necessarily Muse-inspired. I have come to feel that his lasting reputation as a poet depends much on the reconstruction of a sense of

³⁰ Ibid. p.89.

³¹ Ibid. p.86.

³² John Crowe Ransom, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, eds. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p.111.

³³ Ransom's comments bring to mind the more overtly programmatic essays of his fellow Americans, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

his poetry's diversity, and that means seeing the Muse poetry as a phase- albeit an important one... There are moments in the early work which have at least the same appeal as the best Muse poems, though on entirely different grounds.³⁴

Rooksby challenges the commonly held assumption that Graves's Muse-poetry represents the pinnacle of his lyric achievement, thereby reminding us that the earlier verse has equal (if not greater) claims on our attention, albeit for very different reasons. Far from being unfocused, undisciplined juvenilia, Graves's post-war lyrics demonstrate a level of formal diversity, thematic inclusiveness and general experimentation that remains unparalleled in any other 'phase' of his career. Among them we find letter poems, satirical verses, long poem-sequences and philosophical dialogues. Once we acknowledge the breadth and complexity of these lyrics, it becomes increasingly difficult to disregard the theories that informed (and were informed by) them. For all the labyrinthine brilliance of *The White Goddess* as a text in its own right, the effect of its 'one story and one story only' upon the author's lyric output was, in the end, one of stifling homogeneity. Whereas Graves's later career is often characterised by repetitive poetic forms and reactionary literary politics, his early work embraces difference and multiplicity; whether it be in relation to textual analysis, poetic theory or literary tradition

By sidelining *On English Poetry* and *Poetic Unreason* in this way, many of Graves's critics fail to take into account the powerful impact that his post-war theories had upon some of the most significant poets and critics to emerge from the 1920s. In addition to Empson and Ransom; Louis MacNeice and W. H. Auden also absorbed this material during what were, arguably, their most formative years. When Empson pointed out in 1955 that 'Modern literary criticism was invented by a number of different people, but by Graves as much as any other individual'³⁵ he had the pre-Riding Graves chiefly in mind and not simply, as is commonly assumed, the Graves who collaborated on *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. Indeed, Empson's observation serves as a much-needed reminder that, along with T. S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* (1920) and I.

³⁴ Rikky Rooksby, 'Review of Robert Graves's *Complete Short Stories* and *Complete Poems*, vol. 1', *Notes and Queries*, 45:1, March 1998, p.137.

³⁵ William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1987), p.130.

A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), Graves's critical prose of the early to mid-1920s provided one of the cornerstones of what is now loosely referred to as the New Criticism. Remarkably, however, Graves's post-war writings receive no attention in three of the most recent histories of literary criticism: Harry Blamires's *A History of Literary Criticism* (1991), Chris Baldick's *Criticism and Literary Theory: 1890 to the Present* (1996) and *The Cambridge History of Criticism: Modernism and the New Criticism* (2000). Instead, each of these accounts attributes Graves's importance exclusively to his work in *A Survey*. Similarly, Graves's significance as a poetic theorist in these early works is seldom acknowledged. Jon Cook's *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000* (2004), for example, reprints an extract from *A Survey*, even though that volume is probably less suited to the category of poetic theory than its post-war predecessors. W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis do include a handful of passages from Graves's early prose in their anthology *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (2000). It should be noted, however, that these pieces are taken from *The Common Asphodel*'s revised selection rather than the original sources.

Although this thesis is primarily concerned with providing a detailed, chronological close-reading of Graves's post-war criticism, it also investigates, in a less systematic way, the complicated and often contradictory interactions that take place between these texts and the lyrics that Graves published alongside them. Whereas modernist poetry tends to wear its theories on its sleeve, the apparent traditionalism of Graves's verse often masks the fact that it both informs and is informed by a range of parallel theoretical preoccupations. In this sense, Graves's early critical writings reveal the intricate conceptual underside of his seemingly self-contained poems, prompting us to reassess the conventional division between modernist poetics and traditional lyricism. It is the intention of this study, therefore, to relocate Graves's prose of the early to mid-1920s in the modernist moment; that is to say, the moment at which modernism, in its various guises, entered the mainstream of English intellectual life. The publication of Graves's first critical book, *On English Poetry*, for example, coincided almost exactly with the appearance of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. Despite this striking concurrence, Graves's early poetic theories are rarely discussed in relation to

the aesthetic ideals of high-modernism. One of the central aims of this dissertation is to establish just such a dialogue by considering Graves not as a soldier poet so much as a poet-critic of the post-war era, whose contemporaries include T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound rather than, or as well as, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Without ignoring the fact that Graves's war experience lasted well beyond the armistice, or that it played a pivotal role, perhaps *the* pivotal role, in the genesis of his theories, this thesis explores the possibility of rethinking the relationship between Graves's first critical books and the rapidly changing literary-historical moment in which they were produced.

CHAPTER 1

THE POET-CRITIC'S BIRTH: *ON ENGLISH POETRY* (1922)

I. 'AN IMPORTANT BOOK... I HONESTLY BELIEVE': GENESIS, CONTEXTS AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

By the time Robert Graves had completed his eighth and final draft of *On English Poetry* in May 1921¹ he had already published four collections of verse: *Over the Brazier* (1916), *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), *Country Sentiment* (1920) and *The Pier-Glass* (1921), along with two slender pamphlets: *Goliath and David* (1917) and *Treasure Box* (1919). The heavily-revised manuscript was eventually published by Heinemann as a one-hundred and forty-nine page book in July 1922, following an initial American publication with Alfred A. Knopf in May. It had been written in the two years immediately following Graves's demobilization in the early months of 1919, shortly before the end of the First World War. In October of that year Graves, his wife Nancy Nicholson and their first child Jenny established themselves at Boar's Hill near Oxford. Here the twenty-four year old poet began his BA in Classics (though he would soon switch to English Language and Literature) at St John's College. By his own admission, Graves 'took no part in undergraduate life',² choosing instead to spend most of his time at Boar's Hill where a community of poets had formed, including his close friend Edmund Blunden, the current Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges and his successor, John Masefield. Later on Graves revealed that his motives for going to Oxford were bound up with the fact that his poetic hero John Skelton had also been a student there and remained, in his mind, 'the only important poet – if we except Arnold - who has actually graduated in that University'.³ Accordingly, Graves uses a quote from Skelton's 'The Balade of Mustarde Tarte' as the first of his two epigraphs to *On English Poetry*: '...Also of the Mustarde Tarte: Suche problemis to paynt, it longyth to his arte.' The second epigraph, meanwhile, comes from a very different Oxonian poet, one who famously did not graduate: Percy Bysshe Shelley. It is taken from his classic Romantic treatise, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821): 'Poetry subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things.' While Skelton would occupy a privileged

¹ *SL1*, p.126.

² *GTAT(29)*, p.271.

³ *PU*, p.240.

position in Graves's pantheon for the rest of his life, Shelley's influence was shorter lived. Indeed, by as early as 1925 Graves would declare in no uncertain terms: 'with the exception of an occasional phrase like the "yellow bees in the ivy-bloom", Shelley's poetry means nothing to me'.⁴ In *On English Poetry*, however, Shelley is praised as 'a great poet' on the grounds that 'he... schooled his mind to hard thinking on the philosophical and political questions of the day';⁵ an accolade that reveals much about Graves's own poetic values in the years immediately following the War.

Interestingly, Graves's most important relationship at Oxford was not only initiated on one of the rare occasions when he actually attended a university function, it was also with a fellow student who, technically, wasn't even a poet. In March of his first year Graves encountered the already legendary T. E. Lawrence during a dinner at All Soul's College. He was duly surprised to learn that the older man was familiar with his verse and eager to discover as much as he could about the mysterious art of poetry.⁶ On his part, Graves 'felt a sudden extraordinary sympathy'⁷ for Lawrence and, according to Miranda Seymour, quickly came to revere him 'as an almost godlike being'.⁸ He was also one of the very few people, at this time, to whom Graves would turn for advice regarding the development of individual poems. If the romantic figure of Lawrence provided Graves with a kind of ideal self-image and critical confidante, his chief intellectual influence came from beyond Oxford's walls in the form of the 'leading Cambridge neurologist, ethnologist, and psychologist'⁹ W. H. R. Rivers, to whom (along with Lawrence) *On English Poetry* is dedicated. As one of the founders of modern professional anthropology, Rivers, like his fellow dedicatee, was renowned for his pioneering work overseas. In addition to evoking a certain mandarin Oxbridge chumminess, the wording of Graves's dedication implies that, to a certain extent, both his mentors represented an exotic, 'internationalist' antidote to the increasingly insular post-war culture to which he had recently returned: 'To T.

⁴ Ibid. p.267.

⁵ *OEP*, p.39.

⁶ According to Graves, Lawrence's first words to him were: 'You must be Graves the poet? I read a book of yours in Egypt in 1917, and thought it pretty good.' *GTAT*(57), p.243.

⁷ *GTAT*(29), p.269.

⁸ Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1995), p.97.

⁹ *GTAT*(57), p.216.

E. Lawrence of Arabia and All Soul's College, Oxford, and to W. H. R. Rivers of the Solomon Islands and St. John's College, Cambridge'. Moreover, this dual-dedication also foreshadows the interrelated themes of doubling, multiple-parenthood and divided-identity that permeate both *On English Poetry* and the poems that Graves was producing at around this time.

The relationship between psychologist and poet began shortly after the two men first met in July 1917 while Graves was escorting his friend Siegfried Sassoon to the military hospital at which Rivers was stationed. In addition to his own theories, as outlined in studies like *Instinct and the Unconscious* (1920), *Medicine, Magic and Religion* (1924) and *Conflict and Dream* (1932), Rivers exposed Graves to the ideas of Freud, Jung and Sir James George Frazer, thereby providing him with a thoroughly modern alternative to the syllabus he encountered at Oxford. More importantly, however, the 'English reserve and common sense'¹⁰ of Rivers's approach to Freud presented Graves with a way of coming to terms with his own post-war trauma. Although he would later fervently deny ever having any sympathy with Freudian ideas,¹¹ in *Poetic Unreason* (1925) Graves is more candid about his early enthusiasm: 'Since 1918 I had been deeply interested in Freudian psycho-analysis as being a possible corrective for my shell-shock, which had just returned, and I was thinking of putting myself under treatment.'¹² Martin Seymour-Smith reveals that Graves even absorbed *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which had been available in English since 1913.¹³ *On English Poetry* was composed, then, at the very height of Graves's neurasthenia and, though it is unclear as to whether or not he actually underwent a course of therapy (anxious, as he was, that it would be somehow pernicious to his lyric gift), at a period when his own interest in psychoanalysis was at its most intense. It was also written at a time when Freud himself, after encountering the repetition-compulsion of shellshock victims like Graves, was arriving at the crucial turning-point that engendered *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and the controversial theory of the death-drive.

¹⁰ CA, p.vii.

¹¹ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1987), p.97. Since I use J. A. Underwood's recent translation of Freud's text throughout this thesis, I will henceforth be using his title, *Interpreting Dreams*.

¹² PU, p.106.

¹³ Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p.97.

Elsewhere in *Poetic Unreason* Graves links his theoretical preoccupations to his ongoing experience of trauma and, by implication, to his contact with psychoanalytic thought: ‘I admit that I have been led to take an interest in this analytic business partly to give a hereditary scientific interest more scope and partly to find relief from a war neurosis from which I still occasionally suffer’.¹⁴ Graves’s predilection for analysing poetry and his own poetic practice has its roots, at least in part, in his need to gain a fuller understanding of the workings of his own war-haunted mind. The resulting fascination with the ‘new science’ of psychology and its manifestation in his increasingly hallucinatory poems and, in particular, his ventures into theoretical prose, went, for the most part, utterly against the ‘realism’ and anti-intellectualism of the Georgians with whom Graves had been associated ever since Edward Marsh printed a number of his early lyrics in *Georgian Poetry: 1916-1917*. As Paul O’Prey observes, ‘The very notion of theory was itself radical within the Georgian milieu’.¹⁵ Despite drawing ‘sneers’¹⁶ from even close friends like Siegfried Sassoon, Graves’s preoccupation with poetic themes aligned him, to a certain extent, with a growing trend for defining and classifying the modern lyric. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), T. S. Eliot looks back over the past two decades and wonders at the explosion of critical interest in the nature and function of poetry: ‘It is interesting that in our time, which has not produced any vast number of important poets, so many people – and there are a great many more – should be asking questions about poetry.’¹⁷ While Eliot himself (along, perhaps, with Ezra Pound) is remembered as the primary poetic theorist of the 1910s and 20s, countless other poets, academics, reviewers and publishers were also much concerned with poetry’s place and purpose at around this time. Prominent literary figures like Herbert Read, Conrad Aiken, Harold Monro and Edwin Muir, for example, all tackled, in one form or another, ‘the state of the art’.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.82.

¹⁵ *CWP*, p.viii.

¹⁶ *SLI*, p.135.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933, rpt 1980), p.125.

However, if *On English Poetry* was symptomatic of the post-war vogue for poetic theorising, it didn't exactly place its author at the centre of the modernist experiment which was fast reaching its zenith with the publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. At first glance, Graves's displacement among his avant-garde peers seems remarkable given that his early investment in the theories of Freud coincided almost exactly with their widespread arrival into the mainstream of English intellectual life. Although Leonard and Virginia Woolf did not begin to publish Freud's works in translation at the Hogarth Press until 1924, the foundation of the British Psychoanalytic Society in 1919 meant that his theories were very much in the air by the beginning of that decade; even if they were being repudiated in works like D. H. Lawrence's *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and its follow-up, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922). The American writer Bryher (who is now best known for her long-term relationship with the modernist poet and Freud-analysand H.D.) recalled the astonishing ubiquity of Freud's name and ideas throughout the salon culture of the time: 'You could not have escaped Freud in the literary world of the early twenties... Freud! All literary London discovered Freud about 1920... the theories were the great subject of conversation wherever one went at that date. To me Freud is literary England... after the first war'.¹⁸ Though Graves was firmly based in Oxford, rather than 'literary London', his friendship with Rivers obviously enabled him to absorb the tenets of psychoanalysis on his own terms and without recourse to the kind of fashionable Freudian table-talk that was currently sweeping the capital.

It is particularly surprising then to find that, despite the omnipresence of psychoanalytic thought, the great modernist poets (with the notable exceptions of H.D. and the French Surrealists) generally avoided analysis and many of its precepts. As Graham Hough observes, Freud's famous admission that 'The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious' does not necessarily denote a straightforward commonality with the poets of his own time: '[they] carefully guarded their own explorations, and... had little to do with psychoanalysis. Rilke refused to be analysed by Freud; Joyce refused

¹⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1981), p.18.

to be analysed by Jung, and Lawrence thought he had refuted the whole psychoanalytic system'.¹⁹ Hough argues that this aversion was because (rather than in spite) of the growing status of psychoanalysis as one of the 'great public mythologies', leading the modernists to 'evolve... rival myths of their own'. While Graves himself resisted analysis and later went on to develop one of the greatest 'rival myths' of all in the form of the White Goddess, his (albeit brief) adoption of certain psychoanalytic principles at a time when Freud was at his most visible is, nonetheless, almost unique within the context of English-speaking Modernism.²⁰ As Linda Shires points out, Graves was 'the first British poet to make a full intellectual use of unconscious states of mind',²¹ an achievement has been inexplicably overlooked in most accounts of modern literary history.

Not only were Graves's psychological themes often out-of-step with the ideas of his fellow poets, his manner was also strikingly at odds with the typically programmatic style of the modernist aesthetic treatise. Going on the evidence of the short introductory 'Note' that precedes *On English Poetry*, the reader could be forgiven for viewing Graves's book as something of an *anti-manifesto*:

These notebook reflections are only offered as being based on the rules that govern my own work at the moment, for many of which I claim no universal application and have promised no lasting regard. They have been suggested from time to time mostly by particular problems in the writing of my last two volumes of poetry. Hesitating to formulate at present a comprehensive, water-tight philosophy of poetry, I have dispensed with a continuous argument, and so the sections either stand independently or are intended to get their force by suggestive neighbourliness.

Rather than, say, the authoritative 'LIST OF DON'TS'²² that Ezra Pound set out in *Poetry* magazine some ten years earlier, we get a seemingly innocuous

¹⁹ Graham Hough, 'The Modernist Lyric', *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1976, rpt 1991), p.318.

²⁰ Two further exceptions are the American poet Conrad Aiken (1889-1973) and the British poet-critic Herbert Read (1893-1968), both of whom were early exponents of Freudian theory. Though, in the case of Read, as Martin Seymour Smith Points out, Graves (just about) got there first. Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p.97.

²¹ Linda M. Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1985), p.31.

²² Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect' (1918), *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), p.4.

collection of ‘notebook reflections’ on what Graves finds to be ‘the rules that regulate my own work at the moment’. Far from formulating ‘a comprehensive, water-tight philosophy of poetry,’ then, these observations are presented as personal, provisional and partial (in both senses of the word). As Graves points out, there is no ‘continuous argument’ as such, only sixty-one short chapters on subjects that seem to range from the sublime (‘Inspiration’, ‘Moving Mountains’, ‘Poetry and Primitive Magic’) to the ridiculous (‘The Bowl Marked Dog’, ‘Spenser’s Cuffs’, ‘The Pig Baby’). Though they ‘stand independently’ (one reviewer even went so far as to liken them to ‘aphorisms’),²³ thematically the vast majority of these sections overlap, combining to form a collage of poetic theory, textual analysis, personal anecdote and literary history. In terms of its disarming structural looseness, Graves’s volume anticipates W. H. Auden’s distinctly post-modern preference for ‘a critic’s notebooks’ over ‘his treatises’.²⁴

A tension emerges, however, between the diffidence of the author’s tone in the above passage and the revelation that his critical prose stems from ‘particular problems’ that arose during the genesis of his ‘last two books of poetry’: *Country Sentiment* and *The Pier-Glass*. On the one hand, Graves appears to be playing-down the importance of his book, while on the other, he highlights its rooted-ness in his poetic practice, enigmatically alluding to a series of writing-related ‘problems’ as the primary source. This curious disparity between what Graves says in his introductory note and how he says it suggests that we should be wary of reading *On English Poetry* as a sequence of notepad jottings and nothing more. Indeed, two letters which Graves wrote in 1921 reveal that he placed much greater store in his first prose volume than he was willing to let on. The first of these is addressed to Siegfried Sassoon and is dated 29 May: ‘I want to send you my book about poetry which is now after 8 rewrites more or less complete... It is more like a manifesto now, ain’t it? and less like a jumble. But I am so afraid of being dull and pompous, that I would rather be thought flighty and casual.’²⁵ The fact that *On English Poetry* went through ‘8 rewrites’ indicates that it was hardly the ragbag of

²³ A. Williams-Ellis, ‘Poets and Poetry’, *Spectator*, 5 August 1922, CXXIX, p.184.

²⁴ W. H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.xii.

²⁵ *SLI*, p.126.

spontaneous ‘notebook reflections’ that Graves describes in his introduction. Though the book may have begun life in this form,²⁶ it was obviously extensively restyled in order to make it ‘more like a manifesto’. At the same time, however, Graves admits (in not so many words) to consciously avoiding the proselytising impulse, preferring to appear ‘flighty and casual’ rather than ‘dull and pompous’. In this respect, it seems that he wanted to achieve the coherence of a manifesto (as opposed to the incoherence of ‘a jumble’), without being seen to adopt the genre’s more ‘pompous’ stylistic traits.²⁷ In the second letter, addressed to Edward Marsh and dated 8 December, Graves announces that his ‘prose book will be out soon,’ adding ‘An important book Eddie, I honestly believe’.²⁸ At such moments Graves’s mask of self-deprecation slips to reveal a seriousness of intent that was almost wholly suppressed in print.

While modest in some regards, the tone of Graves’s prose debut is also openly mischievous and oppositional as the author takes obvious delight in playing the role of *provocateur*. Again, this is made plain in the introductory note which begins with the words: ‘The greater part of this book will appear controversial’ and concludes: ‘when putting a cat among the pigeons it is always advisable to make it as large a cat as possible’. It is also evident from the way in which Graves couples his rather clipped and sober title, *On English Poetry*, with a sprawling and infinitely more anarchic subheading: ‘Being an Irregular Approach to the Psychology of This Art, from Evidence Mainly Subjective’. While the former suggests a comprehensive, cogent and disinterested study, the latter hints at a maverick exercise in critical improvisation and personal poetics. Bearing in mind the author’s preoccupation with psychoanalysis at this time, it seems that a vaguely Freudian conflict is already taking place, with the book’s id and superego

²⁶ As an adolescent Graves kept a journal in which he recorded random thoughts every day ‘on any subject that came into [his] head’. Given the disjunctive, improvisatory nature of this exercise, it seems almost certain that it provided the blueprint for the notebook on which *On English Poetry* was based. Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p.80

²⁷ Paul Fussell lists ‘pomposity’ among Graves’s chief ‘enemies’ (along with ‘solemnity, certainty, complacency [and] cruelty’); arguing that it was ‘the Great War that brought [it] to his attention’. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, rpt 2000), p.206.

²⁸ *SLI*, p.130.

jostling alongside one another on the opening page. In many ways, *On English Poetry* stands as Graves's most unapologetically *subjective* critical work and, perhaps because of this, his most revealing.²⁹ Whereas in the later criticism (and *The White Goddess* in particular) Graves often appears unwilling to own up to the obvious eccentricity of some of his theories, in this, his first prose volume, he freely admits it: 'I have given this book a plain heading... But I am afraid that extravagance has broken down my determination to write soberly, on almost every page'.³⁰ In this sense, it clashes directly with the more sober Arnoldian doctrine of critical objectivity that T. S. Eliot espoused a year after *On English Poetry's* publication, in his essay 'The Function of Criticism' (1923):

... 'interpretation' ... is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed... Comparison and analysis... are the chief tools of the critic. ...any book, any essay... which produces a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art is a better piece of work than nine-tenths of the most pretentious critical journalism... The real corrupters are those who supply opinion or fancy; and Goethe and Coleridge are not guiltless...³¹

I suspect that Graves, at least at this early stage of his career, would have happily numbered himself among the 'corrupters' that Eliot spoke of (although, as we shall see, he too adopts 'comparison and analysis', albeit in alliance with critical 'fancy').

Though it was received (if not composed) in the austere shadow of *The Sacred Wood* (1920), Graves's approach in *On English Poetry* bears a greater resemblance to the kind of romantic criticism that Oscar Wilde envisioned in 'The Critic as Artist' (1890). While Graves never makes anything like Wilde's lofty claims for the creative primacy of critical prose (quite the opposite in fact),³² he obviously revelled in the extravagant intellectual freedoms that the genre afforded him; freedoms that were mostly unavailable in the lecture

²⁹ This may go some way toward explaining why it was so rigorously suppressed in future years.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.39.

³¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932, rpt [with revisions/corrections] 1999), pp.84-5.

³² Richard Perceval Graves quotes a letter from Graves, dated 18 September 1920, in which he reveals his preference for 'honest homespun say-what-you-mean prose, not rhetoric like Macaulay or Pater or those blokes'; *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926*, p.80.

rooms of Oxford. Finding the university's emphasis on early eighteenth-century poetry largely 'tedious',³³ Graves turned his attention to Keats and the Romantics, whose lyrics had sustained him - as they had sustained his fellow soldier-poets Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas - throughout the duration of the War. He also immersed himself in Coleridge's own masterpiece of personal notebook criticism, *Biographia Literaria* (1817) which, he claimed, 'should be the poet's Bible'.³⁴ This extra-curricular fascination with Romantic poetry and poetics was deemed highly idiosyncratic by much of the English department and, in *Goodbye to All That*, Graves recalls one academic's inadvertently prophetic observation: "I understand, Mr Graves, that the essays which you write for your English tutor are, shall I say, a trifle temperamental. It appears, indeed, that you prefer some authors to others".³⁵ If these 'temperamental' Romantic preferences conflicted with the canon advocated by his professors, they were equally incompatible with the sense of 'tradition' that was fast emerging from the modernist vortex. Although Frank Kermode,³⁶ Harold Bloom³⁷ and others, have highlighted the unacknowledged links between Romanticism and modernism, Graves's complicated allegiance to the likes of Keats and Coleridge nonetheless placed him firmly outside the decidedly anti-Romantic territory that figures like Eliot³⁸ and Pound were busily staking-out.

In the wake of, what were seen to be, the Romantic excesses of the Aesthetic movement, both the literary establishment and the avant-garde increasingly viewed the elusive phenomenon of Romanticism as a decadent endorsement of poetic immaturity and irresponsibility, inviting charges of formlessness, escapism and self-absorption. As a product of the 'dissociation of sensibility' that he famously identified in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), the Romantic tradition, for Eliot, embodied the erroneous belief that poetry acts as a mode of self-expression rather than as a means of 'impersonally' diagnosing and countering the ills of the culture at large. T. E. Hulme, whose

³³ *GTAT(29)*, p.262.

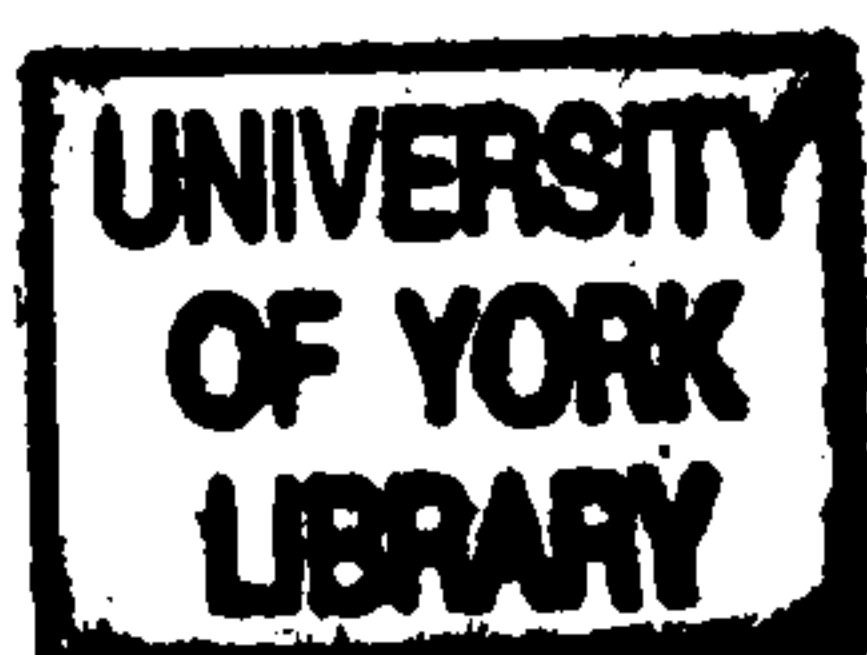
³⁴ *OEP*, p.132.

³⁵ *GTAT(29)*, p.263.

³⁶ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London and Glasgow: Fontana, 1971).

³⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (London and Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971).

³⁸ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.26.



ideas had a considerable impact on the young Eliot, also gravitated towards the Classical ‘definite’ rather than the Romantic ‘infinite’, challenging the notion that man is a ‘reservoir of possibilities’³⁹ and proposing instead a proto-Imagist poetics of ‘accurate, precise and definite description’.⁴⁰ Though English Romanticism was outwardly resisted by a number of the most significant modernists, it was, as Edna Longley points out, inwardly ‘revisited’ on an unprecedented scale by those other ‘men of 1914’, the poets of the Great War: ‘If the war exposed the emptiness of post-Romantic poeticalities, it also reactivated the conceptual and linguistic radicalism of Romanticism itself, and impelled a chastened Romantic idealism into new manifestos’.⁴¹ In Graves’s case, psychoanalysis, that other frowned-upon cult of the personal, provided an uncanny vehicle for this ‘reactivation’. While countless poets and critics, from Herbert Read⁴² and Lionel Trilling⁴³ to Ted Hughes⁴⁴ and Adam Phillips,⁴⁵ have drawn attention to the essential continuities between early nineteenth-century Romantic thought and psychoanalytic theory, *On English Poetry* remains one of the first (and most forgotten) attempts to demonstrate the possibility of such a reading. As a result, it stands as a remarkably anomalous work of literary criticism within the context of what we now tend to regard as the ‘high-modernist’ period of the early 1920s.

The critical response to *On English Poetry* was decidedly mixed. In the *TLS*, an anonymous reviewer wrote: ‘Mr. Graves has the courage not only of many excellent aphorisms, but of opinions more seductive for his own contradiction of them. He loves common sense, is in love with uncommon

³⁹ T. E. Hulme, ‘Romanticism and Classicism’, *Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p.70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.78.

⁴¹ Edna Longley, ‘The Great War, history, and the English lyric’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the Great War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.65.

⁴² Herbert Read, ‘Psychoanalysis and Literary Criticism’ (1924), *Selected Writings: Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp.106-7.

⁴³ Lionell Trilling, ‘Freud and Literature’ (1941), *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1971, rpt 1991), pp.276-290.

⁴⁴ Ted Hughes, ‘The Poetic Self: A Centenary Tribute to T. S. Eliot’, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp.274-5.

⁴⁵ Adam Phillips, ‘Promises, Promises’, *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.364.

nonsense.’⁴⁶ J. Middleton Murray, meanwhile, in *The Nation and The Athenaeum*, predictably remarked:

It is incoherent; Mr. Graves seems to have composed it by pinning together scattered leaves of his notebook: and the incoherence of the whole is not compensated by any great lucidity of the parts. Many of them – and those among the most important – are unintelligible, apparently because Mr. Graves has himself not mastered his theory.⁴⁷

One of the most positive reviews was A. Williams-Ellis’s in *The Spectator*, which contains the observation: ‘Poetry is a subject that grows periodically stale and dusty. Mr. Graves’s book is as profound and revitalizing as it is entertaining.’⁴⁸ The most damning, however, comes from Conrad Aiken, another psychoanalytically-inclined poet, who, writing in *The New Republic*, argues: ‘Mr. Graves has taken a few vague psychoanalytic notions out of the air, added a few half-comprehending observations of his own behaviour before, during and after composition, and written a pompous, fatuous and gloriously inaccurate book.’⁴⁹ John Crowe Ransom, a very different American poet, took the polar opposite view in the first issue of his magazine, *Fugitive*: ‘The study of the psychological origins is absorbing, and Graves is the first man to handle it who compounds in his own person a genuine poetic talent with modern psychological learning.’⁵⁰ Graves, as it happened, was already a fan of Ransom’s verse and would soon write to him, asking permission to put together a volume of his poems for an English readership.

⁴⁶ Anon., ‘Excursions and Alarums’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14 September 1922, p.580.

⁴⁷ J. Middleton Murray, ‘A Poet on Poetry’, *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, 16 September 1922, p.797.

⁴⁸ A. Williams-Ellis, ‘Poets and Poetry’, *The Spectator*, 5 August 1922, p.185.

⁴⁹ Conrad Aiken, ‘Sludgery’, *The New Republic*, 22 November 1922, p.340.

⁵⁰ John Crowe Ransom, ‘Editorial’, *Fugitive*, 1:1, April 1922, p.67.

II. A SENSIBILITY OF DISSOCIATION: THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

The central argument of *On English Poetry* revolves around Graves's conviction that the poet is in possession of what he calls 'multiple sub-personalities' that, from time to time, collide with one another and cause conflict. The idea of a multiple poetic self is, in itself, nothing new; or rather it is so intimately bound up with our sense of the 'new' or the 'modern' in literature as to be, to some extent, conventional by the time Graves came to formulate his own version of it. The speaker of Whitman's 'Song of Myself' famously contains 'multitudes', while Baudelaire's 'To the Reader' tells us that 'A demon nation riots in our brains'.⁵¹ However, in marked contrast to the images of multiple-selfhood explored by earlier writers, Graves's theory of the poet's sub-personalities has a curiously pathological bent that sets it some way apart. 'They have a simple origin', he claims, 'as supplying the need of a primitive mind when confused. Quite normal children invent their own familiar spirits, their "shadows", "dummies" or "slaves", in order to excuse erratic actions of their own which seem on reflection incompatible with their usual habits or code of honour.'⁵² Just as a child spontaneously constructs an imaginary 'other' in moments of uncertainty, the conflicted individual effectively splits up into two or more sub-personalities, each one representing a particular side of the problem. By locating the figure of the child at the root of this phenomenon, Graves's account brings to mind Lewis Carroll's Alice (about whom he would soon write one his most memorable early poems⁵³) and her propensity for 'pretending to be two people'⁵⁴ in difficult circumstances.

Although Graves argues that 'it is hardly necessary to quote extreme cases of morbid psychology or to enter the dangerous arena of spiritualistic argument in order to explain the presence of sub-personalities in the poet's mind', this idea (as his rather Jungian references to 'shadows' and the 'primitive mind' suggest) does have its origins, at least in part, in the

⁵¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, ed. and trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, rpt 1998), p.5.

⁵² *OEP*, pp.117-118.

⁵³ See 'Alice', *CPI*, pp.249-50.

⁵⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, ed. Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 1998), p.14.

psychoanalytic concept of dissociation. The term, coined by the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet in his 1889 study *L'Automatisme Psychologique*, describes the pathological existence of two or more distinct personalities in the same person. Perhaps the most famous example of this condition can be found in Morton Prince's monograph, *The Dissociation of a Personality* (1906), which describes the treatment of Christine Beauchamp, a New England woman who, in addition to her everyday personality, was in possession of two other identities that emerged during hypnosis. Though Freud did not take up the theories of the so-called 'dissociationists' of the late nineteenth-century in any direct way (he and Josef Breuer make a nod to Janet in the 'Preliminary Statement' to their 1895 collaboration *Studies on Hysteria*),⁵⁵ certain aspects of their discoveries had an impact on his conception of the mind as a dynamic space where opposing forces meet. Lionel Trilling, for example, noted that, in Freud's theories, 'We find the energetic exploitation of the idea of the mind as a divisible thing, one part of which can contemplate and mock the other'.⁵⁶ In his 1924 review of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the American poet John Crowe Ransom made a similar observation:

The Freudian man is multiple rather than simple, many men bound up loosely in one man. He is in fact a pack of demons, going under the name of John Doe for his legal functions, all of them held under the rod in subjection to a mannerly sort of arch-demon, who persuades himself and the world that he is the real John Doe, the one and only.⁵⁷

For Freud, of course, the primary conflict from which all others issue forth is the one that takes place between the subject's instincts or drives and his or her sense of a societal norm. Since Ransom was familiar with Graves's work by the time he wrote the above passage,⁵⁸ the inspiration for his 'pack of demons' may well have come from the chapter of *On English Poetry* entitled 'My name is Legion: for we are many', as much as Baudelaire's 'demon nation'. Either

⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. Nicola Luckhurst, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 2004), pp.20-21.

⁵⁶ Perry Meisel (ed.), *Freud: A Collection of Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Pentice Hall, 1981), p.97.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.39.

⁵⁸ Ransom's name was becoming known in England at around this time through Graves's publication and promotion of his 1924 volume of poems, *Grace After Meat*.

way, his description of the individual's divided nature is as germane to 'the Gravesian man' as it is to his Freudian counterpart.

Indeed, it was through Ransom's admiring review of *On English Poetry* a few years earlier in the first issue of the *Fugitive* and his subsequent letter to Graves on 11 July 1922 (informing him 'you represent as I see it the best tendency extant in modern poetry')⁵⁹ that the two men became acquainted. Ransom's use of the legal pseudonym 'John Doe' to describe his notion of an 'arch-demon' also recalls Graves's lyric 'Richard Roe and John Doe' which first appeared in September 1921. The poem is a fable-like account of the cuckolded Richard Roe and his attempts to identify with a number of similarly wronged figures from myth and history. Ultimately, however, these imaginary selves are subsumed by the shadowy usurper John Doe, who remains, despite (or rather because of) his crime, Richard Roe's ideal identity:

He wished himself Job, Solomon, Alexander,
For patience, wisdom, power to overthrow
Misfortune; but with spirit so unmanned
That most of all he wished himself John Doe.⁶⁰

Interestingly, in the poem's original version (with which Ransom would have no doubt been familiar), Richard Roe 'wished himself... / power to overthrow / His tyrant'⁶¹ rather than the more abstract 'Misfortune' of the version quoted. In this light, Ransom's 'arch-demon' and Graves's 'tyrant' seem almost certainly related. However, it was through Rivers and his extensive work on dissociation in *Instinct and the Unconscious* that Graves himself first encountered the idea of multiple sub-personalities. 'The special feature of dissociation,' according to Rivers, 'is that the suppressed experience does not remain passive, but acquires an independent activity of its own'.⁶² Rather than exploring the relationship between the act of 'suppression' and the proliferation of sub-personalities (as he does to a greater extent in *The Meaning of Dreams and Poetic Unreason*), Graves chooses in *On English*

⁵⁹ 'To Robert Graves', 11 July 1922; *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, eds. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p.111

⁶⁰ *CPI*, p.147.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* p.377.

⁶² W. H. R. Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious: A Contribution to a Biological Theory of Psycho-Neuroses* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p.73.

Poetry to focus on the ‘independent’ nature of these other selves and the inevitable contradictions that take place between them.

Throughout the book these conflicts are described in vividly metaphorical terms as Graves sets about demonstrating his preference for discussing the ‘poet’s mental clockwork’ through ‘fables and analogies... instead of psychological jargon’.⁶³ In this respect Graves resembles Freud who, as John Forrester points out, allied himself with ‘lay views [and] “old wives’ tales” against official, respectable science’.⁶⁴ In one passage, for example, the poet is cast in the unlikely guise of a police-officer writing up a report on the psychological equivalent of a barroom-brawl:

The poet is consciously or unconsciously always... taking in... new ideas... until suddenly every now and again two of them violently quarrel and drag into the fight a group of other ideas that have been loitering about at the back of his mind for years; the great excitement, noise and bloodshed, with finally a reconciliation and drinks all round. The poet writes a tactful police report on the affair and there is the poem.⁶⁵

There is almost something of the Keystone Cops in the spontaneous knockabout confusion of this scene. We certainly seem to be a long way from the controlled, clinical environment that Eliot evokes in his image of the poet’s mind as ‘a bit of finely filiated platinum... introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide’⁶⁶ (although D. J. Enright, in a crucial essay on Graves from the 1960s, does liken Eliot’s sense of tradition to a ‘policeman’s grip’).⁶⁷ Instead, Graves’s description of ideas piling into the poet’s mind recalls Friedrich Schiller’s account of poetic production, as quoted by Freud in the second chapter of *Interpreting Dreams*: ‘In a creative mind... it seems to me that reason has pulled back its sentry from the gates, ideas pour in pell-mell, and only afterwards does it take stock and examine the whole great crowd’.⁶⁸ But are we to read Graves’s policeman, like Schiller’s

⁶³ *OEP*, p.31.

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, trans. J. A. Underwood, ed. John Forrester (London: Penguin, 2006), p.xiii.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.26.

⁶⁶ Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), *Selected Essays*, p.17.

⁶⁷ D. J. Enright, ‘Robert Graves and the Decline of Modernism’, *Conspirators and Poets* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p.56.

⁶⁸ Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.115.

sentry, as a representative of straightforward ‘reason’? The last time a ‘police-presence’ of any kind was felt in Graves’s writing was in ‘Escape’, a 1916 lyric that dramatises (and mythologizes) the poet’s near-death experience after sustaining serious wounds during the Battle of the Somme. On finding himself transported to Hades, the speaker flees pursued by ‘angry hosts / Of demons, heroes, and police-man ghosts’.⁶⁹ While we would expect to find demons and heroes in any classical depiction of the underworld, the spectacle of the spectral policemen in this kind of mythical setting seems just as incongruous as *On English Poetry*’s implied composite image of the policeman-poet. However, the seemingly benevolent, reconciliatory influence of the latter bears little resemblance to the angry mob of ghostly officers that hounds the speaker-protagonist of ‘Escape’. In Freudian terms, Graves’s theoretical policeman is more ego than superego, providing mediation between opposing forces rather than heavy-handed censorship.

We find a distant, but arguably more distinct, echo of the above passage in *The Long Weekend* (1940), a social history of Britain between the Wars that Graves co-wrote with Alan Hodge in the late nineteen-thirties. In their account of the immediate aftermath of the Great War, Graves and Hodge refer to an article in *The Bystander* that ‘reminded its readers that, though peace had been made with Germany, Britain was still playing the *policeman* in Fiume, Constantinople, Palestine, Mesopotamia... India, Siberia, Hong Kong and Singapore. The public, however, was unperturbed. Germany at least was beaten [emphasis mine]’.⁷⁰ The phrase ‘playing the policeman’ in this context is presumably an allusion to the Conservative politician Andrew Bonar Law and his infamous description of England as ‘the policeman of the world’. We know, from another passage in *The Meaning of Dreams*, that, far from sharing this public complacency, the shell-shocked Graves remained acutely aware of the precariousness of this particular phase of ‘peacetime’: ‘Nineteen hundred and twenty-one was a very anxious year, there being wars and rumours of wars in Russia, Ireland, the near East and elsewhere, and my nervous

⁶⁹ *CPI*, p.31.

⁷⁰ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p.31.

condition got worse.’⁷¹ In this light, the image of the policeman-poet in *On English Poetry* suggests an indirect (and perhaps inevitable) identification, on Graves’s part, with the ‘peacemaking’ efforts of Imperial England in the volatile post-war climate of the early nineteen-twenties.⁷² It also seems that the daily newspapers and their warnings against premature celebration were as much behind Graves’s emerging poetic theory as ‘the modern psychological books’⁷³ in which he hoped to find a cure.

From a literary perspective, Graves’s trope of the poem-as-police-report brings to mind Eliot’s famous working-title for the original, uncut version of *The Waste Land*, which appeared only a few months after *On English Poetry*: ‘He Do The Police in Different Voices’. Whereas Eliot’s provisional heading suggests a Dickensian exercise in poetic ventriloquism in which the ‘police’ (or *polis*) provide a series of dummies for the poet’s ‘different voices’, Graves’s hypothetical policeman acts as a single conduit through which those different voices merge and become reconciled. As an image of the poet’s unifying sensibility, the policeman, in this context, clearly represents a belated version of Coleridge’s principle of the Imagination; albeit a strikingly, almost ironically, prosaic one.⁷⁴ What could be less conventionally poetic, after all, than ‘a tactful police report’? By way of an answer to this question we might consider another similarly bureaucratic role that Graves assigns to the poet at several other points in the text: that of conference-chairman.

The mind of a poet is like an international conference composed of delegates of both sexes and every shade of political thought, which is trying to decide on a series of problems of which the chairman has

⁷¹ *MOD*, p.163.

⁷² T. S. Eliot would later make a more overt case for viewing Britain as a ‘mediating’ influence on the post-war stage: ‘Britain is not only the bridge, the middle way, between two parts of western Europe; she is, or should be, by virtue of the fact that she is the only member of the European community that has established a genuine Empire – that is to say, a world-wide empire as was the Roman empire – not only European but the connection between Europe and the rest of the world.’ Eliot, ‘A Commentary’, *Criterion*, 7:3, March 1928, p.194.

⁷³ *GTAT*(29), p.278.

⁷⁴ Graves’s strategy of disguising Romanticism’s central tenet is symptomatic of what Lennart Nyberg refers to as ‘the shadowlike itinerary of the word ‘imagination’ in twentieth-century poetry’ and significantly complicates the commonly held notion that Graves (and early Graves in particular) was a straightforward Romantic. Lennart Nyberg, ‘“The Imagination”: A Twentieth-Century Itinerary’, *Rethinking Modernism*, ed. Marianne Thormahlen (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.43.

himself little previous knowledge – yet this chairman, this central authority, will somehow contrive to sign a report embodying the specialised knowledge and reconciling the apparently hopeless disagreements of all factions concerned.⁷⁵

This image looks ahead to *The Orators* (1932) and Auden's 'Divine Commission' of angels who, after going their separate ways, reunite to 'collaborate in a complete report'.⁷⁶ Interestingly, however, Graves's vision of the poet's mind as a paradoxically public arena forever on the brink of civil unrest seems very much at odds with the desolate, post-Romantic mindscapes of the poems that he published in the period immediately leading up to *On English Poetry*'s composition; poems like 'Lost Love', 'Rocky Acres' and 'Return', for example. It also suggests a degree of textual polyphony that we might not ordinarily associate with, what is often taken to be, the 'univocal' mode of the brief lyric in which Graves specialises. Helen Vendler has addressed this common misconception by emphasising that 'the voices in lyric are represented not by characters, as in a novel or drama, but by changing registers of diction, contrastive rhythms, and varieties of tone. There is no complex lyric that does not contain within itself a congeries of forces...'⁷⁷ The Northern Irish poet Michael Longley, whose verse owes a considerable debt to Graves, similarly observes that 'Poetry, even the most intensely lyrical, is unlikely to be a solo flight.'⁷⁸ As we will see, the supposedly unified surfaces of Graves's poems often constitute a far more dynamic interplay of 'forces' than has hitherto been recognised. It is also worth remembering that, since 1917, his chief poetic influence had been John Skelton, a poet whose work, as Helen Cooper points out in a recent article, 'puts *The Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos* in the shade'⁷⁹ when it comes to sheer multifarious-ness.

If Graves's conference metaphor is, superficially, out of line with the structural and thematic concerns of his early verse, the idea of the poem-as-report does seem entirely appropriate to the rather clipped, business-like style

⁷⁵ *OEP*, pp.33-34.

⁷⁶ W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977, rpt [with revisions/corrections] 1986), pp.61-2.

⁷⁷ Helen Vendler, 'Soul Says', *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p.578.

⁷⁸ 'Musarum Sacerdos: an interview with Michael Longley', *Poetry Review*, 96:4, Winter 2006/7, p.63.

⁷⁹ Helen Cooper, 'Skeltonics', *London Review of Books*, 28: 24, 14 December 2006, p.32.

that Graves the officer-poet (as distinct from Eliot the office-poet) was already cultivating.⁸⁰ Indeed, the curiously administrative imagery of the police officer dutifully writing up his statement and the chairman bringing the conference to order seems less incongruous when we consider the proximity of *On English Poetry*'s composition to the Treaty of Versailles and its 'reconciliation' of electorates who were, as Michael Howard puts it, 'still in the grip of war fever'.⁸¹ In *Goodbye to All That*, for example, Graves confessed to being 'shocked' by the Treaty and by civilian England's lack of interest in, what seemed to him, its ominous progress:

it seemed to lead certainly to another war and yet nobody cared. When the most critical decisions were being taken at Paris, public interest was concentrated entirely on... home-news items... I began to hear news, too, of my mother's relatives in Germany and the penury to which they had been reduced, particularly those who were retired officials and whose pension, by the collapse of the mark, was reduced to a few shillings a week. Nancy and I took all this to heart; we now called ourselves socialists.⁸²

Though not quite the Dante-inspired walking dead of *The Waste Land* or Pound's vision of England as 'an old bitch gone in the teeth' in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920),⁸³ the image of the British public evoked by this passage suggests a comparable malaise; albeit in political rather than spiritual terms. By implication, it also places the Versailles Treaty (as much as the Great War itself) squarely at the heart of *On English Poetry*'s 'political unconscious'.⁸⁴ If, indeed, Graves did unknowingly identify with the post-war plight of imperial (or 'policeman') England, as I have suggested, this identification was profoundly complicated by his rather more conscious (and conscientious) sympathy for the defeated 'enemy'. While *On English Poetry* can hardly be classed as a socialist text, this sense of outrage manifests itself in Graves's belief that resolution is achieved in the poet's conflicted mind by bringing all

⁸⁰ Anthony Thwaite remarks: 'reading his own poems aloud, Graves did indeed sound a bit like a first world war subaltern running through company orders'. Thwaite, 'In Thrall to the White Goddess', *The Guardian*, 5 July 2003.

⁸¹ Michael Howard, *The First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.136.

⁸² *GTAT*(29), p.257.

⁸³ Ezra Pound, *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.188.

⁸⁴ There is no evidence, however, to suggest that Graves read John Maynard Keynes's bestselling account of the Treaty, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919); a work that, as Tom Paulin notes, Eliot 'read and digested' during the genesis of *The Waste Land*. Paulin, 'All at Sea in The Waste Land', *The Guardian*, 7 January 2007.

factions to some kind of democratic or ‘unilateral’ agreement rather than by finding for any one particular party. Perhaps this is most evident in the highly politicised language that Graves employs to warn us that, should ‘the victors dictate their own laws, un-contradicted’ (as he felt they were at the time in Paris), poetry itself becomes impossible and the result is either propagandising ‘legal prose or (from habit)... verse’.⁸⁵ In other words, where there is no conflict and the writer is possessed of just one aim there can be no poetry. Like that other ‘double man’ of English verse, W. H. Auden, Graves makes it his poetic business ‘To say two different things at once, / To wage offensives on two fronts’.⁸⁶

In order to illustrate his conflict theory Graves turns to a handful of extracts from Elizabethan drama. In these lines, he argues, ‘a battle of the great emotions, faith, hope or love against fear, grief or hate, will certainly appear; though one side may indeed be fighting a hopeless battle’.⁸⁷ Along with quotations from *Doctor Faustus* and *Macbeth*, Graves examines Ferdinand’s great line from *The Duchess of Malfi*: ‘Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died too young’, pointing out that ‘the word “dazzle” does duty for two emotions at once, sun-dazzled awe at loveliness [and] tear-dazzled grief for early death’.⁸⁸ By locating the poet’s (or in this case the character’s) psychological conflicts in the ambiguity of individual words, Graves’s brief but brilliantly agile reading provided, arguably, the single most important critical source for the dazzling theories of multiple-meaning that William Empson would later develop in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).⁸⁹ Moreover, Graves’s very specific use of Elizabethan drama to make this point aligns him, to a certain extent, with Eliot and his roughly contemporaneous observation in ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ that the ‘telescoping of images and multiplied association is characteristic of the phrase of some of the dramatists

⁸⁵ *OEP*, p.3.

⁸⁶ W. H. Auden, ‘New Year’s Letter’, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.212.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p.23.

⁸⁹ In a letter to Laura Riding dated 25 August 1970, Empson reveals that he had been ‘greatly struck’ by the reading of Ferdinand’s line that appears in *On English Poetry*, citing it as evidence for his claim in the preface to the second edition of *Seven Types* (1947) that Graves ‘is, so far as I know, the inventor of the method of analysis I was using here’. See John Haffenden (ed.), *Selected Letters of William Empson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.428-431.

of the period Donne knew: not to mention Shakespeare, it is frequent in Middleton, Webster, and Tourneur, and is one of the sources of the vitality of their language.’⁹⁰ Though both Graves and Eliot uphold the rich play of association demonstrated by the dramatic poetry of the Elizabethans, they each do so with a difference in emphasis that is slight but telling. Whereas Graves frames his discussion by highlighting the conflicts (‘a battle of the great emotions’) enacted by much Elizabethan drama, Eliot focuses on the unities (of feeling, thought and sensibility) that such writing exemplifies. By foregrounding the emotional discord behind the perfectly-realised poetry, Graves’s approach arguably betrays his allegiance to Romanticism; a tradition that the Eliot of the early 1920s was keen to disavow in theory, if not necessarily in practice.

We find a more sustained application of Graves’s conflict theory in his reading of Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’; a lyric which would remain, along with ‘Kubla Khan’, a touchstone for the poet throughout his career.⁹¹ Drawing on biographical material from Sidney Colvin’s *Life of Keats* (1917), Graves argues that there was a palpable tension in Keats’s mind at the time of ‘La Belle Dame’s’ inception between his growing but unhappy love for Fanny Brawne and his well-founded fear of death by consumption. This conflict, according to Graves, is perfectly embodied in the shape of the poem’s eponymous femme fatale: ‘the Merciless Lady, to put it baldly, represents both the woman he loved and the death he feared, the woman whom he wanted to glorify by his poetry and the death that would cut his poetry short’.⁹² In addition to highlighting this pivotal opposition, Graves also speculates on the meaning of the lines: ‘And there I shut her wild, wild eyes / With kisses four’ by referring to the ‘journal-letter’ that Keats wrote to his brother George (14 February-3 May 1819) containing what appears to be an early draft of the poem. Graves maintains that Keats’s explanation of these lines in the letter (‘I was obliged to choose an even number [of kisses] that both eyes might have

⁹⁰ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.283.

⁹¹ Graves’s analysis of ‘La Belle Dame’ is reprinted, in significantly revised form, in both *The Meaning of Dreams* and *The White Goddess*. Of the version that appears in the latter, Harold Bloom writes: ‘Graves has made a separate career as the most persuasive of modern misreaders of texts, and assuredly he is misreading here, though his misreading is more imaginative than any of the other published readings of the ballad.’ *The Visionary Company*, pp.375-6.

⁹² *OEP*, pp.51-2.

fair play') is imbued with 'a triviality and a light-heartedness'⁹³ that only served to conceal the seriousness of the poem's origins from his already depressed brother. This account reminds us that Graves's own ostensibly lighted-hearted commentaries often have a dark, war-haunted underside which would have been hidden to all but a few of his closest readers.

Not only, Graves maintains, did Keats's brother George know comparatively little about Fanny Brawne, he was also absent in America when his younger brother Tom died of consumption the previous year. In Graves's view, it was Keats's presence at Tom's death-bed, his apprehension of the advanced symptoms of a disease that he himself dreaded, and the mingling in his mind of this scene with certain memories of the elusive Fanny Brawne, that produced the playful yet deathly imagery of 'La Belle Dame':

...he had seen the lilly on Tom's brow, the hectic rose on his cheek, his starved lips in horrid warning gaping, and as the final horrible duty, had shut his brother's wild staring eyes with coins, not kisses. Now Fanny's mocking smile and sidelong glance play hide and seek in his mind with Tom's dreadful death mask.⁹⁴

As for the poem's reference to 'kisses four,' then, Graves wonders rhetorically whether it might not have been an allusion to 'the painful doubleness of the tragic vision' described above, whereby 'two of the kisses were more properly pennies laid on the eyes of death'. It was, Graves argues, precisely this 'painful doubleness,' this running together of two distinct but interlinked experiences, that Keats was attempting to 'limit,' whether consciously or unconsciously, when he later rewrote the lines as: 'And here I shut her wild sad eyes – / So kissed asleep'. It is Graves's conviction that, by replacing the second 'wild' of the earlier version with the word 'sad', Keats loses the double meaning that was evoked by the original repetition, in which both the elfin, untamed wildness of Fanny's manner *and* the horrified, panic-stricken wildness of his dying brother's eyes coexisted.

In addition to the English army after the War and the Allied Statesmen of Europe, Graves's conception of the poet as a mediator among warring factions could be ascribed, in part, to his youthful admiration for both the

⁹³ Ibid. p.52.

⁹⁴ Ibid. p.52.

diplomatic Professor Rivers and the expert guerrilla negotiator, T. E. Lawrence.⁹⁵ In *On English Poetry*, however, the poet's special aptitude for intuitive, psychological mediation is attributed to the nature of his or her particular family background:

When we say that a poet is born not made... It means to me that... the poet, like his poetry, is himself the result of the fusion of incongruous forces. Marriages between people of conflicting philosophies of life, widely separated nationalities or (most important) different emotional processes, are likely either to result in children hopelessly struggling with inhibitions or to develop in them a central authority of great resource and most quick witted at compromise...⁹⁶

This, of course, all sounds very familiar to a reader of Graves's biography and can, as Randall Jarrell⁹⁷ points out, be traced back to the poet's perception of his own family history as divided between the coldly logical (though somewhat bluff-prone) Graveses and the more generous and humane von Rankes. Not only was each side of the family in possession of 'different emotional processes' (as well as some very similar ones) they also hailed from 'widely separated nationalities'. His father was the Irish poet Alfred Perceval Graves, son of the Bishop of Limerick, and his mother, Amalie (or Amy) von Ranke, was born in London but belonged to a distinguished German family. Critics like Nicholas Carter⁹⁸ and Frank Kersnowski⁹⁹ have emphasised Graves's essential 'Englishness', while Fran Brearton has argued persuasively that his work is 'caught between English and Irish traditions'.¹⁰⁰ Relatively little has been said, however, about Graves's German-ness, which is surprising given that, according to Martin Seymour-Smith, 'his actual home life was more German in style than English'.¹⁰¹ It was also one of the main causes of some of his earliest conflicts at Charterhouse in the years leading up to the War. As he recalls in *Goodbye to All That*:

⁹⁵ Another model of mediation might have been Thomas Hardy, who, according to Graves, was 'chairman of the Anti-Profiteering Committee' during the War. *GTAT*(57), p.251.

⁹⁶ *OEP*, p.33.

⁹⁷ Randall Jarrell, *The Third Book of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955, rpt 1975), p.79.

⁹⁸ D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989), p.46.

⁹⁹ Frank L. Kersnowski, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2002), p.135.

¹⁰⁰ Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.98.

¹⁰¹ Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p.29.

Businessmen's sons, at this time, used to discuss hotly the threat, and even the necessity, of a trade war with the Reich. 'German' meant 'dirty German'. It meant: 'cheap, shoddy goods competing with our sterling industries.' It also meant military menace, Prussianism, useless philosophy, tedious scholarship, loving music and sabre-rattling.¹⁰²

Needless to say, this sense of displacement and divided loyalty only intensified with the onset of fighting and Graves's enlistment. It is captured in his memoir with characteristic alacrity in a description of a conversation he held in the trenches with a fellow Anglo-German soldier: 'I told him: "Well, I have three or four uncles sitting somewhere opposite, and a number of cousins, too. One of those uncles is a general..."'¹⁰³

History, in short, made Graves acutely aware of his own peculiar status as a product of seemingly 'incongruous forces'; a position he obliquely explores in a short, riddling poem that was first printed in December 1922, a few months after *On English Poetry's* publication, entitled 'The Poet's Birth':

A page, a huntsman, and a priest of God,
Her lovers, met in jealous contrariety,
Equally claiming the sole parenthood
Of him the perfect crown of their variety.¹⁰⁴

The poet's three potential fathers in this curious family romance could be read as representatives of Graves's three competing 'nationalities': a page of the English court, a German huntsman and an Irish priest (the latter seems perhaps the most plausible given the clerical background of Graves's own Irish grandfather). The task of identifying the one 'sole,' or, indeed, 'soul' (if we take into account that half-rhyme of 'God' with 'parenthood') father among the trinity proves to be impossible, not only because the enigmatic mother-figure 'loved too well', but because the child appears to be 'the perfect crown of their variety'. In a kind of bizarre inversion of the Immaculate Conception, she implicitly advises her son to acknowledge all three fathers and, paradoxically, none of them at all:

'But, many-fathered little one,' she said,

¹⁰² *GTAT*(57), p.38.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p.61.

¹⁰⁴ *CPI*, p.171.

‘Whether of high or low, of smooth or rough,
Here is your mother whom you brought to bed.
Acknowledge only me, be this enough,
For such as worship after shall be told
A white dove sired you or a rain of gold.’¹⁰⁵

Despite the Christian overtones of the commandment ‘Acknowledge only me’ and the Holy Spirit imagery of the white dove (though Graves is quick to correct the straightforwardness of this last association in *Poetic Unreason*¹⁰⁶), the deification of the mother in quasi-Oedipal terms (‘Here is your mother whom you brought to bed’) strikingly anticipates the unifying feminine principle of the Muse or Goddess of poetry, for whom Graves would eventually forsake all geographical loyalties (a factor that makes the poem’s absence from his later volumes of *Collected Poems* all the more striking). Not only does this lyric suggest the presence of Graves’s own formidable Victorian mother, it also probably indicates the powerful feminist influence of his wife, Nancy, whose ‘crude summary of the Christian religion: “God is a man, so it must be all rot”, took a load’ he confessed ‘off my shoulders’.¹⁰⁷

If the incongruities of the poet’s family background create within his mind an unusually chaotic site of ‘jealous contrariety’, they also, according to Graves, lead him to evolve an unusually powerful capacity to negotiate these conflicts; a capacity lacking in the more ‘single-minded’ individual: ‘the rival sub-personalities formed in him... constantly struggle to reconciliation in his poetry, and in proportion as these sub-personalities are more numerous more varied and more inharmonious... his controlling personality [becomes] stronger and quicker at compromise’.¹⁰⁸ Multiplicity, in this formula, engenders not a state of disintegration, but, paradoxically, a greater degree of coherence. In other words, the more dissonant the mind, the stronger the ego-like ‘controlling personality’ or chairman becomes, until the poet is able to extend his talent for inner-arbitration beyond the confines of his own psyche, into the greater disorders of the public world:

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p.171.

¹⁰⁶ *PU*, p.35.

¹⁰⁷ *GTAT(57)*, p.221.

¹⁰⁸ *OEP*, p.123.

he becomes a more or less capable spokesman of that larger group-mind of his culture which we somehow consider greater than the sum of its parts: so that men of smaller scope and more concentrated loyalties swallow personal prejudices and hear at times in his utterances what seems to them the direct voice of God¹⁰⁹

This is perhaps the only passage in *On English Poetry* that deals explicitly with the theme of the poet's social role; a theme that will be taken up to a much greater extent in *Poetic Unreason*. The idea of the poet as public spokesman brings to mind Tennyson, Kipling and, in a slightly different vein, the poets of the Great War who generally made public address their weapon of choice against 'The old Lie'.¹¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Graves should hold fast to the Wordsworthian notion of the poet as a man speaking to men in the year that saw the publication of *The Waste Land*: 'a poem, ' Alan Marshall points out, 'which dealt, in an inevitably *private* way, with the disappearance of those common values which make a *public* language possible'.¹¹¹ For Graves, however, such a language evidently remained a possibility, in theory at least. In July 1922, shortly after *On English Poetry*'s publication, he contributed to a piece in Harold Monro's monthly periodical, *The Chapbook*, in which he elaborated upon his rapidly-developing sense of the poet's public function:

The poet, if he is a poet in the fullest sense of the word, must stand in the middle of the larger society to which he belongs, and reconcile in his poetry the conflicting views of every group, trade and class in that society: he must be before he is a poet in any full sense, scientist, philosopher, mechanic, clerk, bagman, journalist – not less than natural historian, litterateur, child and lover.¹¹²

This ambitious, Shakespearean ideal anticipates (and may well have directly informed) Louis MacNeice's famous call for 'a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. pp.123-4.

¹¹⁰ Wilfred Owen, 'Dulce et Decorum Est', *The War Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994, rpt 2003), p.29.

¹¹¹ Alan Marshall, ' "England and nowhere"', *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. A. D. Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.95.

¹¹² 'Three Questions Regarding the Necessity, the Function, and the Form of Poetry', *The Chapbook*, ed. Harold Monro, no. 27, July 1922, p.13.

actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions'.¹¹³ Unlike MacNeice's robustly journalistic poetry of the 1930s and 40s, however, Graves's verse rarely tackles social themes head on.

Indeed, by the summer of 1919 (shortly before he began work on *On English Poetry*) Graves had ostensibly abandoned the War itself as a viable subject. This, he believed, represented not a refusal of public opinion but rather a concession to it. Given, what Graves took to be, the British public's apathy and complacency at this time, the only way to be a spokesman was, ironically enough, to turn away from the kind of large political statements that so-called 'war poetry' made commonplace. In a letter to Edmund Blunden dated 12 July 1919 he writes: 'War-poetry is played out I'm afraid, commercially, for another five or ten years... Country Sentiment is the most acceptable dope now, and this is the name I've given my new poems.'¹¹⁴ By Graves's own admission, however, 'occasional corpses' continued to 'blunder up'¹¹⁵ in even his most sentimental lyrics and, by the time he came to write his next collection, *The Pier-Glass*, the War had once again taken centre stage; albeit from a psychological rather than a realist angle. Graves's hypothesis that the reading public would share his own post-war appetite for seemingly unpolitical, escapist poetry turned out to be, as far as he was concerned, something of a miscalculation since *Country Sentiment*, like its more war-haunted successor, *The Pier-Glass*, did not reach the broad readership that he had initially envisioned. With both volumes falling somewhat short of Graves's ambitious 'three or four thousand-copy sale[s]'¹¹⁶ target, he claims that he finally gave up on the prospect of securing a substantial audience for his work: 'after *The Pier-Glass*, published in 1921, I made no attempt to write for the ordinary reading public, and no longer regarded my work as being of public utility'.¹¹⁷ Given that Graves continued to pursue the notion of a public poetic voice (not to mention the idea of poetry as 'public utility') in his theoretical prose for a number of years after *The Pier-Glass*'s publication, we have to question the authenticity of this account. It seems likely, in other words, that

¹¹³ Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, ed. Michael Longley (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.xviii.

¹¹⁴ *SLI*, p.113.

¹¹⁵ 'To Siegfried Sassoon', 9 July 1918; *ibid.* p.95.

¹¹⁶ *GTAT*(29), p.287.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.292.

the Graves of *Goodbye* is attempting to tidy up what remains arguably the most contradictory phase of his career so far; a strategy that he would employ more and more as the various editions of his *Collected Poems* piled up over the ensuing years.

Graves's underdeveloped but rather grandiose theory of the spokesman-poet in *On English Poetry* suggests that, far from being a purely psychological phenomenon, the poet's sub-personalities are also the product of his contact with, and internalisation of, the conflicting social forces of a broader cultural landscape. However, when the men of 'more concentrated loyalties' who inhabit this landscape are not listening to the 'God-like' words of legislating bards, they view them as 'hypocrite[s] and... traitor[s]'¹¹⁸ because, like Keats's 'chameleon poet',¹¹⁹ 'they adopt an entirely different view of life, a different vocabulary, gesture, intonation, according as they happen to find themselves'.¹²⁰ Graves observes that, while this infuriating Cheshire cat evasiveness makes lasting loyalty of any kind particularly difficult, many poets take great joy in their mercurial tendency to do 'the quick change'¹²¹ and elude the expectations of friends, critics and institutions: 'He... finds it amusing to watch the comments of reviews or private friends on some small batch of poems which appear under his name. Every poem... is virtually by a different author... it all turns on which "dummy" or "sub-personality" had momentarily the most influence on the mental chairman'. This last statement seems to betray an inconsistency in Graves's theory since, as we have seen, he *also* maintains that poetry becomes impossible if any one sub-personality monopolises the chairman's attention in this way. Indeed, Graves himself later admitted that he was, without fully realising it, 'confused', in *On English Poetry*, 'as to the meaning of "solution to conflict"'.¹²² On the other hand, this discrepancy could be read as, literally, a textbook example of the

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.123.

¹¹⁹ 'To Richard Woodhouse', 17 October 1818; *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.157.

¹²⁰ *OEP*, p.119.

¹²¹ Graves, for example, clearly took a certain amount of delight in anticipating the reaction of readers to his *Pier-Glass* poems since they marked, in some respects, a dramatic departure from the nursery lyrics of his previous collections: 'people may dislike them, but, as coming from R.G. who has a reputation principally based on nursery rhymes, they will insist on notice of some sort'. 'To Edward Marsh', 7 October 1920, *SL1*, p.120.

¹²² *PU*, p.164.

wily poet performing one of his trademark ‘quick changes’ to keep us on our toes or, at least, to prevent us from treading on any of his. Whether a product of muddled thinking or a carefully calculated evasion, this notion of the poet as escape-artist almost certainly stems from the capricious, metamorphic nature of Graves’s own poetic identity at this time; an identity that, ironically enough, could only be maintained by a process of perpetual dissociation.

III. ‘THE ORACULAR NOTE’: DREAM SYMBOLISM AND POETRY-AS-THERAPY

After enduring a prolonged Conscription of the Spirit, Graves was, it seems, absolutely determined to avoid being appropriated by any form of organised cause. As he puts it in *Goodbye to All That*: ‘I... had sworn on the very day of my demobilization never to be under anyone’s orders for the rest of my life’.¹²³ Indeed, Graves’s increasingly multiple sense of self could be viewed as a strategy which helped him to elude being pinned down or co-opted in just this way. As a result he found that, like the ‘many-fathered’ child of ‘The Poet’s Birth’ and the cuckolded protagonist of ‘Richard Roe and John Doe’, he was soon shifting between a range of alternative personas which included, to put it crudely: ‘realistic’ war poet, Georgian versifier, haunted shellshock victim and, of course, wayward Freudian theorist. Though these restless transformations provide early evidence of what Robert Lowell in a letter to Elizabeth Bishop admiringly called Graves’s ‘wonderfully nervous and ever exercised mind’,¹²⁴ the response among critics and fellow-poets was often one of bewilderment and suspicion. After reading Graves’s unpublished typescript collection, ‘The Patchwork Flag’ (1918), for example, Siegfried Sassoon complained: ‘I don’t like the few grim war things mixed up with all the irresistible nursery & semi-serious verses.’¹²⁵ For Sassoon, then, ‘The

¹²³ *GTAT*(57), p.236.

¹²⁴ ‘To Elizabeth Bishop’, 11 September 1957; *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p.292.

¹²⁵ *CPI*, p.350.

Patchwork Flag' was something of a 'mixed' bag. As its title would suggest, the same can be said of Graves's previous collection, *Fairies and Fusiliers*, not to mention the three volumes that followed it: *Country Sentiment*, *The Pier-Glass* and *Whipperginny* (1923). While *Country Sentiment* contains, according to one poem, 'Love, Fear and Hate and Childish Toys / ... discreetly blent',¹²⁶ *The Pier-Glass* is, by Graves's own account, 'half a reaction against shell-shock by indulging in a sort of *dementia praecox*... of fantastic daydreams... half... an attempt to stand up to the damned disease and write an account of it'.¹²⁷ *Whipperginny*, meanwhile, begins with a mixture of lyrics left over from Graves's *Country Sentiment* and *Pier-Glass* periods and ends with a series of pieces that would have been written around the time of *On English Poetry*'s completion. In his 'Author's Note' Graves warns the reader that 'in most of these later pieces will be found evidences of greater detachment in the poet and the appearance of a new series of problems in religion, psychology and philosophy'.¹²⁸ He adds that 'The "Interlude" in the middle of the book was written before the appearance of these less lyrical pieces, but must be read as an apology for the book being now even less homogenous than before.'¹²⁹ As apologies go, however, Graves's poem 'Interlude: On Preserving a Poetic Formula' (which is partially quoted in *On English Poetry*)¹³⁰ is hardly an uncomplicated request for forgiveness.

According to the *OED* an interlude is, among other things, 'a pause between the acts of a play' or 'something performed or done during this pause'. Appearing, as it does, halfway through *Whipperginny*, 'Interlude' certainly has the feel of a theatrical intermission, with the poet apparently stepping out from behind his lyrics to address the reader directly:

'There's less and less cohesion
In each collection
Of my published poetries?
You are taking me to task?'¹³¹

¹²⁶ 'A First Review', *ibid.* p.114.

¹²⁷ 'To Edmund Blunden', 10 March 1921, *SLI*, p.124.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p.372.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* p.373.

¹³⁰ *OEP*, p.120.

¹³¹ *CPI*, p.159.

Graves's opening gambit of reiterating the charge that has been brought against him looks ahead to Geoffrey Hill's propensity for heckling his own hecklers in late poems like *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), which begins with the declaration: 'You have sometimes said / that I project a show more / stressful than delightful.'¹³² The tone of Graves's poem, however, is more cajoling than confrontational,¹³³ as the speaker wryly attends to the irritation of his reviewers and poet-contemporaries, imploring them, with mock-deference, to 'permit only once more for luck / Irreconcilabilities in my book'. In answer to the allegation of inconsistency, he maintains that his various poetic roles are in fact

....all the same stuff really,
 The obverse and reverse, if you look closely,
 Of busy Imagination's new-coined money;
 And if you watch the blind
 Phototropisms of my fluttering mind,
 Whether, growing strong, I wrestle Jacob-wise
 With fiendish darkness blinking threatfully
 Its bale-fire eyes,
 Or whether childishly

I dart to Mother-skirts of love and peace
 To play with toys until those horrors leave me –
 Yet note, whichever way I find release,
 By fight or flight,
 By being harsh or tame,
 The SPIRIT'S the same, the Pen-and-Ink's the same.¹³⁴

Rather than a straightforward statement of regret, then, the poem presents us with a dizzying catalogue of conceptual doubles, oppositions and reversals: 'obverse and reverse', 'love and peace', 'fight or flight', 'harsh or tame', 'pen-and-ink'. By mixing poetic, economic ('busy Imagination's new-coined money'), scientific ('Phototropisms') and biblical ('Jacob-wise') registers, while at the same time maintaining a single, coherent speaking voice, 'Interlude' brilliantly plays out the tension between Graves's conception of the poet's multiple-selves and his notion of a unified, chairman-like 'controlling

¹³² Geoffrey Hill, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), p.225.

¹³³ In the section of *On English Poetry* entitled 'Connection of Poetry and Humour', Graves observes: 'A sympathetic grin, as poets and other conjurors know, is the best possible bridge for a successful illusion.' *OEP*, p.40.

¹³⁴ *CPI*, pp.159-60.

personality'. Just as the speaker of Whitman's 'Song of Myself' asserts his right to 'contradict' himself,¹³⁵ Graves's poem defends its author's incongruous poetic manoeuvres on the grounds that they stem from a cohesive emotional source; namely the desire to 'find release' from those 'horrors' that have plagued him since the War. According to the speaker, this desire is realised 'By fight or flight': two opposites that the poem's complex dramaturgy suggests might be, if not 'the same' then (given their rhyming status) made of the 'same stuff'.¹³⁶ Similarly, when the poet argues, in another internal rhyme, that his irreconcilabilities are actually the 'obverse and reverse' of a single metaphorical coin, we are alerted to the fact that both words literally contain 'verse', indicating perhaps that poetry itself is the common currency here.

At stake in Graves's model of a multiple, divided self and of the lyric as an expression and resolution of conflict, is the belief that poetry, whatever else its functions, has potentially therapeutic value for both poet and reader. In the original 1929 edition of *Goodbye to All That*, Graves identified this ideal as the driving force behind *On English Poetry's* composition: 'I regard poetry as, first, a personal cathartic for the poet suffering from some inner conflict, and then as a cathartic for readers in a similar conflict.'¹³⁷ Similarly, in *The Common Asphodel* Graves outlined his post-war intention to formulate what amounted to a poetics of recovery: 'My hope was to help the recovery of public health of mind, as well as my own, by the writing of "therapeutic" poems, and to increase their efficacy by a study of the nature of poetry "from subjective evidence"'.¹³⁸ The state of the public 'health of mind' after the War was, of course, one of the overriding themes of *The Waste Land*, which appeared in the same year as *On English Poetry*; a year in which 'nerves' throughout Europe were unquestionably 'bad'. In their very different ways, both texts are the product of personal breakdown and the broader psychic exhaustion of Western civilization. In Graves's case, the result is a

¹³⁵ Graves quotes Whitman's famous line, approvingly, in the section of *On English Poetry* entitled 'The Poet as Outsider'. *OEP*, p.96.

¹³⁶ In *Instinct and the Unconscious* Rivers discusses what he calls the 'danger instincts' of 'flight' and 'aggression'; both of which depend upon an 'all or none principle' whereby the 'reaction is carried out as completely as possible'. Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious*, p.61.

¹³⁷ *GTAT(29)*, p.291.

¹³⁸ *CA*, p.vii.

psychotherapeutic theory of poetry that draws on both classical anthropology and Romantic poetics:

Poetry as the Greeks knew when they adopted the Drama as a cleansing rite of religion, is a form of psycho-therapy. Being the transformation into dream symbolism of some disturbing emotional crisis in the poet's mind (whether dominated by delight or pain) poetry has the power of homoeopathically healing other men's minds similarly troubled, by presenting them under the spell of hypnosis with an allegorical solution of the trouble. Once the allegory is recognised by the reader's unconscious as applicable the effective power of his own emotional crisis is diminished...¹³⁹

Graves appears, in this passage, to be aligning himself with a tradition of poetry-as-therapy that has its roots in the 'cleansing rites' of Aristotelian catharsis and finds modern expression, via Romanticism, in Freud's 'The Creative Writer and Daydreaming' (1907), with its suggestion that 'the real enjoyment of a literary work derives from the relaxation of tensions in our minds'.¹⁴⁰ Graves's account of the origins of poetry also brings to mind the mysterious, quasi-religious 'cleansing rite' that takes place in the final section of *The Waste Land*. However, whereas Eliot views the poet's mind as a catalyst that remains 'inert, neutral, unchanged'¹⁴¹ by its own creations, Graves envisions a process whereby the author's mental landscape is profoundly altered during the act of composition.

The emphasis on 'symbolism' in the above passage and throughout *On English Poetry* is particularly noteworthy given the modernist preference for particularity exemplified by Ezra Pound's demand that there be 'direct treatment of the "thing"'.¹⁴² Indeed, Graves's allegorical model is closer, in many ways, to Yeats's belief that the poet 'never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table'¹⁴³ and looks ahead to the parable theories of early Auden¹⁴⁴ and late MacNeice.¹⁴⁵ But why, in Graves's schema, is 'dream symbolism' favoured over 'direct treatment' as a means of communicating the

¹³⁹ *OEP*, p.84-5.

¹⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003), p.33.

¹⁴¹ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.18.

¹⁴² Pound, *Literary Essays*, p.3.

¹⁴³ W. B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction to my Work' (1937), *Selected Criticism*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1964), p.255.

¹⁴⁴ W. H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art To-day' (1935), *The English Auden*, p.341.

¹⁴⁵ Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

conflict? Given that Graves describes the ‘emotional crisis’ at the root of the poem as ‘disturbing’ it seems plausible to suggest that it is subjected to some kind of repression.¹⁴⁶ This would explain why the conflict undergoes a ‘transformation’ and re-enters the poet’s conscious mind in a significantly altered, symbolic form. Martin Seymour-Smith takes this line in his discussion of *On English Poetry*, arguing that the poet, crucially, ‘doesn’t... want to know the truth about himself’.¹⁴⁷ The reorganised and re-imagined version of the original disorder, in the form of the poem, not only provides cathartic relief by allowing the poet to unburden himself; it also contains hidden within it an ‘allegorical solution’ to the problem from which it arose. From this perspective, Graves’s formula owes a considerable debt to Freud’s theory of ‘dream-work’ and its contention that unacceptable desires manifest themselves in dreams through distortion and disguise.¹⁴⁸ For Freud this idea also extends to the production of literary texts, since the author learns, in a comparable fashion, to transform his otherwise shameful fantasies into fully realised works of art, provoking aesthetic pleasure in his readers rather than moral indignation or disgust.¹⁴⁹ As Adam Phillips memorably puts it: ‘poetry is the smugglers’ art, repackaging contraband so it can be available on the open market’.¹⁵⁰ Graves, of course, locates psychological conflict, rather than daydream, at the heart of this phenomenon, shifting the emphasis away from egotism and sexual desire to a more general sense of personal crisis.

Nevertheless, as Daniel Hoffman points out, Graves’s symbolist aesthetic was not, as it was for many of his modernist contemporaries, a product of nineteenth-century French poetry, but rather the result of his exposure to the psychoanalytic idea of dream symbolism during his time spent with Rivers: ‘Graves found the symbolist position perhaps nascent in the

¹⁴⁶ This idea is born out by Graves’s reading of ‘La Belle Dame’, in which he argues that Keats’s poem was the product of a ‘*suppressed* emotional conflict [emphasis mine]’. *OEP*, p.51.

¹⁴⁷ Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p.100.

¹⁴⁸ In his famous chapter on ‘Dream-Work’ in *Interpreting Dreams*, Freud vividly describes how ‘the whole mass of... dream-thoughts... undergoes the squeezing effect of dream-work in which the pieces are twisted around, broken up and thrust against one another, rather like drifting ice-floes’. Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.327.

¹⁴⁹ In ‘The Creative Writer and Daydreaming’, Freud proposes that ‘the writer tones down the character of the egoistic daydream by modifying and disguising it, and bribes us with the purely formal – that is aesthetic – bonus of pleasure that he offers us in the way he presents his fantasies’. Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.33.

¹⁵⁰ Phillips, ‘Poetry and Psychoanalysis’, *Promises, Promises*, p.11.

literary climate during the Georgian period, but it was made most readily available to him in the theories of his psychoanalyst.¹⁵¹ In his next book, *The Meaning of Dreams*, Graves argues that Freud's most important contribution lay in his conviction that even the most apparently nonsensical dream is in possession of a latent or symbolic content:

Freud showed very plainly that in dreams the mind, even the mind of a rational straightforward practical man, instead of thinking in the usual way, frequently thinks in symbols. Indeed, Freud's strongest claim to fame is that he dared to bring back though in a changed form the idea that dreams are symbolic; an idea which... had been long discredited...¹⁵²

The notion that dreams have a hidden significance is, Graves claims in *On English Poetry*, nothing new among people of supposedly 'primitive' cultures, who long ago 'discovered what scientists are only just beginning to acknowledge, that the recollection of dreams is of great use in solving problems of uncertainty; [that] there is always a secondary meaning behind our most fantastic nightmares'.¹⁵³ Drawing, like Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and others at around this time, on Frazerian anthropology, Graves suggests that such people recounted their dreams to the witchdoctor or priestess of the community in order to have them explained. If a dream could not be fully remembered or if the subject failed to experience a dream that would help him or her with a difficult decision, the shaman would 'induce a sort of self-hypnotism, and in the light of the dream so dreamed, utter an oracle which contained an answer to the problem proposed'.¹⁵⁴ This answer would be pronounced in a compellingly rhythmical manner, possibly accompanied by drumbeats or gongs and would 'intoxicate' the audience into 'sympathetic emotional action'.¹⁵⁵

Graves argues that the poet inherits this ability in the form of 'the poetic trance', whereby 'He learns in self-protection to take pen and paper and let the pen solve the hitherto unsolvable problem which has caused the

¹⁵¹ Daniel Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.159.

¹⁵² *MOD*, pp.12-13.

¹⁵³ *OEP*, p.19.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p.20.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p.20.

disturbance.’¹⁵⁶ The habit of self-hypnotism is developed, then, as a kind of defence-mechanism against the overwhelming pressure of warring sub-personalities.¹⁵⁷ It is only on re-entering consciousness, that the poet finds his crisis has been somehow resolved in the form of a poem. Evoking the Coleridge of ‘Kubla Khan’, Graves claims that interrupting such a trance is akin to waking a sleepwalker, and, depending on the depth of the poet’s reverie, he will most likely have little or no memory of writing the poem or fragment that lies before him. This dream source, for Graves, is what distinguishes Romantic poetry from logically conceived Classical verse, giving it ‘the advantage of putting the audience in a state of mind ready to accept it; in a word, it has a naturally hypnotic effect’.¹⁵⁸ Just as the witchdoctor hypnotises his audience with rhythmical utterances delivered from within a state of trance, the poem born out of dream or vision is imbued with a potent, spell-like music that somehow heightens the reader’s receptivity. Paul Muldoon, a poet whose critical writings clearly bear the stamp of Graves’s influence, sums up this hypnotic exchange in the following terms: ‘The key to Graves’s notion of “trance” is that both reader and writer are involved in it. Both are “hypnotised”. Writer and reader blend into one indivisible function.’¹⁵⁹ But how does this occur and to what end exactly? According to Graves: ‘The musical element is, properly understood, not merely a hypnotic inducement to the reader to accept suggestions, but a form of psycho-therapy in itself, which, working in conjunction with the pictorial allegory, immensely strengthens the chance of its success.’ So the hypnotic rhythm is not simply a glorified rhetorical device; it is, more fundamentally, an instrument for unlocking the poem’s allegorical content and, by implication, its therapeutic potential.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p.26.

¹⁵⁷ As much as any traditional account of poetic reverie, this process brings to mind Anna O.’s ‘tendency to auto-hypnotic absences’, as described by Joseph Breuer in his and Freud’s *Studies in Hysteria*, p.43. It also recalls Graves’s own habit of slipping into neurasthenic daydreams after returning home from the War: ‘In the middle of a lecture I would have a sudden very clear experience of men on the march up the Bethune – La Basse Road... Or it would be in Laventie High Street, passing a company billet... Or I would be in a barn with my first platoon of the Welsh Regiment... Or in a deep dug-out at Cambrin, talking to a signaller... These daydreams persisted like an alternate life and did not leave me until well in 1928.’ *GTAT(57)*, pp.239-240.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p.74.

¹⁵⁹ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.375.

A passage in which Graves addresses the subject of ‘prose poetry’ inadvertently sheds a good deal of light on his conception of the poem’s peculiarly ‘hypnotic’ quality: ‘[Prose poetry] employs the indirect method of poetic suggestion, the flanking movement rather than the frontal attack, but like Prose, does not trouble to keep rhythmic control over the reader. This constant control seems an essential part of Poetry proper.’¹⁶⁰ By exercising ‘rhythmic control’ the poet directs his reader’s attention towards certain key words, since, as Graves puts it: ‘In regulated verse the reader is compelled to accentuate as the poet determines.’¹⁶¹ These accentuated words gradually suggest, through their combined associations, an allegorical meaning beyond the obvious prose sense of the poem. Just as Freud argues that latent dream-content is more important than manifest-dream content,¹⁶² ‘In Poetry’, Graves maintains, ‘the implication is more important than the manifest statement; the underlying associations of every word are marshalled carefully.’¹⁶³ Graves demonstrates this process by comparing the poet to ‘a father piecing together a picture-block puzzle for his children’:

He surprises them at last by turning over the completed picture, and showing them that by the act of assembling the scattered parts of “Red Riding Hood and with the Basket of Food” he has all the while been building up unnoticed underneath another scene of the tragedy – “The Wolf Eating the Grandmother.”¹⁶⁴

This illustration bears a striking resemblance to Freud’s description, in *Interpreting Dreams*, of the dream as a ‘picture-puzzle’ which appears to display a nonsensical scene until its various component images are translated, via free-association, into words and syllables that ‘produce the most beautiful and meaningful poetic aphorism’.¹⁶⁵ As we shall see, the crucial difference for Graves between the dream and the finished poem lies in the fact that the latter never appears nonsensical in the manner of Freud’s picture-puzzle. It does, however, contain a comparable body of clues which, taken together, lead the reader to a more ‘meaningful’ layer of poetic experience. More specifically,

¹⁶⁰ *OED*, p.14.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* p.46.

¹⁶² Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.177.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p.14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p.25.

¹⁶⁵ Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.294.

this experience is bound up with the reader's capacity to apprehend a solution to his or her particular conflict within the poem's otherwise hidden allegorical content.

Like the witchdoctor's cryptic trance-monologues, then, poetry of this kind always has an ambiguous 'oracular note';¹⁶⁶ a description that reminds us of Graves's propensity for writing mysterious fables like 'Richard Roe and John Doe' and 'The Poet's Birth' (though, at the same time, it also puts us in mind of the very different oracular passages that figure in *The Waste Land*, not to mention Auden's early poems). In his lecture 'Feeling into Words' (1974), which features Graves's 1963 lyric 'Dance of Words',¹⁶⁷ Seamus Heaney makes a similar analogy between Delphic wisdom and poetic utterance: 'Traditionally an oracle speaks in riddles, yielding its truths in disguise, offering its insights cunningly. And in the practice of poetry, there is a corresponding occasion of disguise, a protean, chameleon moment when the lump in the throat takes protective colouring in the new element of thought.'¹⁶⁸ By drawing indirectly on Joyce's 'cunning',¹⁶⁹ Keats 'chameleon poet' and Frost's 'lump in the throat',¹⁷⁰ Heaney implicitly ascribes the oracular note to an inbuilt censor that spontaneously performs the dream-work of the poem. In *On English Poetry* this figurative or allegorical element is similarly attributed to the poem's illogical dream-origins, which Graves (echoing Freud's revision of the Wordsworthian credo that 'The Child is Father of the Man')¹⁷¹ equates with childhood creativity: 'dreams 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'.¹⁷² This, in Graves's view, accounts not only for the predominance of nursery iconography in much verse (as in his own poem 'Interlude', with its references to 'Mother skirts' and 'toys', for

¹⁶⁶ *OEP*, p.21.

¹⁶⁷ *CP3*, p.74.

¹⁶⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p.53.

¹⁶⁹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.208.

¹⁷⁰ 'To Louis Untermeyer', 1 January 1916, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p.199.

¹⁷¹ William Wordsworth, 'My heart leaps up when I behold', *Selected Poetry*, ed. Stephen Gill and Duncan Wu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, rpt 1998), p.122.

¹⁷² *OEP*, p.68.

example), but also for the poet's preoccupation with feelings, reactions and states of mind that are often associated with childhood experience:

It explains... the constant appeal poetry makes to the childish habits of amazed wondering, sudden terrors, laughter to signify mere joy, frequent tears and similar manifestations of uncontrolled emotion which in a grown man and especially an English man are considered ridiculous; following this last, the reason appears for the strict Classicist's dislike of the ungoverned Romantic... founded on a feeling that to wake this child spirit in the mind of a grown person is stupid and even disgusting, an objection that has similarly been raised to the indiscriminate practice of psycho-analysis, which involves the same process.¹⁷³

That Graves himself would later on take this stance makes its repudiation here all the more intriguing; particularly since he was drawn to 'the *English* reserve and common sense [emphasis mine]' of Rivers's version of Freud.¹⁷⁴ Neither can we fail to notice that Graves's list of 'childish habits' bear more than a passing resemblance to the symptoms of his own post-war trauma.¹⁷⁵

However, if the dreamer, the child and the poet are all of imagination compact, Graves does not advocate the Romantic idea of 'spontaneous undoctored poetry' as straightforwardly as this passage might suggest.

Unlike the Surrealists who endorsed un-censored automatic writing, or, later on, Allen Ginsberg with his 'first thought best thought' maxim,¹⁷⁶ Graves, as a rule, almost always regards the first-draft of a poem as raw-material rather than finished product:

spontaneous poetry untested by conscious analysis has the... weakness of being liable to surface faults and unintelligible thought-connections... The rhymes are generally inaccurate, the texture clumsy, there is a tendency to use the same words close together in different senses, and the thought-connections are so free as to puzzle the author himself when he wakes.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Ibid. p.68-9.

¹⁷⁴ *CA*, p.vii. One senses that Rivers was, in many ways, the 'respectable' public face of Graves's early Freudian preoccupations.

¹⁷⁵ For example, appearing before a medical board on Sassoon's behalf, Graves recalls: 'Being in nearly as bad a state of nerves as Siegfried himself, I burst into tears three times during my statement.' *GTAT(57)*, p.216.

¹⁷⁶ We might juxtapose this adage with one proposed by Graves in *On English Poetry*: 'When in Doubt Cut it Out'. *OEP*, p.93.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p.16.

Puzzling ‘thought-connections’ are, of course, the mainstay of modernist poetry, from Gertrude Stein’s experiments with literary cubism to Pound’s ideogrammatic juxtapositions. It is striking that Graves, for all his apparent investment in the creative primacy of the unconscious, refuses to adopt a comparable aesthetic.¹⁷⁸ At one point in *On English Poetry*, for example, he criticises Blake’s *Prophetic Books* for relying solely on the kind of ‘free-association’¹⁷⁹ that poets like Ginsberg would later draw upon so readily. Instead of accepting ‘surface faults’ and ‘unintelligible thought-connections’ as the price of inspiration, then, Graves sets the poet the task of tidying-up his invariably unkempt first-draft; a process that he likens to the application of corrective ‘putty’:

The conscious part of composition is like the finishing of roughly shaped briars in a pipe factory. Where there are flaws in the wood, putty has to be used in order to make the pipe presentable. Only an expert eye can tell the putty when it has been coloured over, but there it is, time will reveal it and nobody is more aware of its presence than the man who put it there.¹⁸⁰

Graves goes on to provide an example of putty in one of his own uncollected poems, ‘Records for Wonder’,¹⁸¹ which was originally published in the *Saturday Westminster Gazette* on 4 June 1921, shortly after *On English Poetry*’s completion. According to Graves, the lyric ‘started sincerely and cheerfully enough’, but, ‘half-way through [the final] verse I was interrupted, and had to finish the poem consciously as best I could’.¹⁸² According to Graves, this entailed inserting a new verse between the first and second stanzas in order to conceal ‘the poverty of [the poem’s] inspiration’. ‘In manuscript’, Graves maintains, ‘the putty didn’t show, somehow, but... in print it seemed to show disgracefully’. If correction of this kind is, as Graves

¹⁷⁸ Graves’s resistance to modernist techniques is made all the more intriguing by the fact that he would soon come to praise the work of modernists like Stein, Isaac Rosenberg, Laura Riding and e. e. cummings in *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry, Another Future of Poetry* and, of course, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*.

¹⁷⁹ *OEP*, p.127.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p.78.

¹⁸¹ For the full version of this poem see *CP3*, pp.326-7.

¹⁸² The account obviously brings to mind the most famous instance of interruption in the history of English poetry: that of Coleridge during the composition of ‘Kubla Khan’. So much so, in fact, that the reader wonders whether Graves was really interrupted at all, or whether he simply ran out of inspiration midway through the writing of his poem.

implies, a necessary evil, it is also a decidedly risky business, potentially resulting in the impairment, rather than the improvement, of original material.

We find a more successful instance of revision in the chapter entitled ‘Surface Faults, an Illustration’. Here Graves traces the evolution over six drafts of the opening lines from another of his uncollected lyrics: ‘Cynics and Romantics’ (originally published in *To-Day* in June 1921 and then re-printed in *Oxford Poetry 1921*). As the title suggests, the poem is concerned with ‘contrasting the sophisticated and ingenuous ideas of Love’,¹⁸³ with the speaker apparently taking the side of the latter:

They never guess of Love as we
Have found the amazing Art to be,
Pursuit of dazzling flame, or flight
From web-hung blackness of night,
With laughter only to express
Care overborne by carelessness...¹⁸⁴

‘Love’ is represented here as a cause for both fight (‘Pursuit of dazzling flame’) and flight (‘flight / From web-hung blackness of night’), exerting an irresistible pull towards dangerous passions and conflict, while at the same time providing liberation from the cares and nightmares of everyday existence. (If we replaced ‘Love’ with ‘Verse’ this passage would bear a striking resemblance to ‘Interlude’, in which the poet-speaker stares into the ‘bale-fire eyes’ of ‘fiendish darkness’ even as he ‘dart[s] to Mother skirts of love and peace’.) Graves’s account of the poem’s genesis arguably stages a parallel (or counter) conflict between the ‘cynical’ act of poetic revision and the ‘romantic’ notion of creative spontaneity; only in this case the author implicitly takes the side of the former. Though the cynics of the poem are clearly based on the brothel-visiting soldiers that Graves encountered during the War,¹⁸⁵ they could also be an indirect reference to the anti-romantic side of the poet’s increasingly double nature. The opening lines of the first draft read:

In club or messroom let them sit,
Let them indulge in salacious wit
On love’s romance, but not with hearts

¹⁸³ *OEP*, p. 103.

¹⁸⁴ *CP3*, p.326.

¹⁸⁵ *GTAT(29)*, p.165.

Accustomed to those healthier parts
Of grim self-mockery...¹⁸⁶

‘Cynics and Romantics’ would have been written contemporaneously with *On English Poetry* and its official, communal setting (‘In club or messroom’) certainly mirrors that volume’s theoretical representation of the poet’s mind as a public space. According to Graves, however, he immediately had a problem with the ‘angry jerkiness’ of the line ‘Let them indulge in salacious wit’. Not only, he claims, did it not run smoothly enough; it also revealed too much about the speaker’s attitude toward the cynics.¹⁸⁷ In order for the poem’s rhetoric to work, Graves argues, these early lines had to be delivered as impartially and as unobtrusively as possible. The poet must not, as it were, play his hand too soon.

If Graves’s version of events is to be believed, his initial dissatisfaction with this line sparked off a series of remarkably detailed corrections. First of all, ‘Let them indulge salacious wit’ was promptly changed to ‘Indulging controversial wit’. But this, it seems, was not to Graves liking either since, he argues, it meant that ‘we have the first two lines beginning with “In” which ‘worries the eye’; while “sit, indulging” puts two short “i’s” [too] close together’.¹⁸⁸ Concluding that ‘controversial’ was not the appropriate word since it suggested anger when the cynics are in fact quite casual about their disdain for love, Graves apparently noticed another fault in the phrase ‘love’s romance’, which he found ‘cheap for the poet’s ideal’.¹⁸⁹ As a result, ‘Indulging controversial wit / On love’s romance, but not with hearts...’ became ‘At skirmish of salacious wit / Laughing at love, yet not with hearts...’ Although he approved of ‘skirmish’ because it hints at the cynics’ military profession, and the change of ‘but’ to ‘yet’, Graves claims that he remained uncertain about the close alliteration of ‘sit’, ‘skirmish’, and ‘salacious’. This, he felt, made the cynics sound ‘too much in earnest’¹⁹⁰ when, once again, it is their casualness that he wished to emphasise. Furthermore, Graves reports that he was uncomfortable about the closeness of

¹⁸⁶ *OEP*, p.104.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.104.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p.104.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p.104.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p.105.

the two ‘at’s’ that appear in this version of the poem and decided that ‘one of them must go’.¹⁹¹ The next draft reads: ‘With skirmish of destructive wit / Laughing at love, yet not with hearts...’ After disposing of one of those ‘at’s’, Graves discovered that he now had two ‘withs’ and ‘two short “i’s” next to each other again’.¹⁹² He resolved to put the first ‘at’ back and replace ‘laughing’ with ‘deriding’ since the vowel-sound of the former chimes too much with that of ‘hearts’ and the ‘the long “i”’ of the latter provides ‘a pleasant variant’.¹⁹³ While Graves concedes that this was an improvement, he still disliked the proximity of ‘destructive’ and ‘deriding’. This prompted him to swap the former for ‘ingenious’; a word with a longer vowel-sound and, in his opinion, a greater degree of suggestiveness when it comes to the wit of the cynics. Maintaining that the second ‘in’ (of ‘ingenious’) was now far enough away from the first so as not to cause problems, Graves changed ‘Accustomed’ to ‘Accorded’ on the grounds that it ‘is more accurate and sounds better’.¹⁹⁴ In Graves’s account, the sixth and final draft of the opening lines of ‘Cynics and Romantics’ reads:

In club or messroom let them sit
At skirmish of ingenious wit
Deriding love, yet not with hearts
Accorded etc.¹⁹⁵

However, it seems that this was not the final draft after all, since, in the text of the poem that appears in the recent three-volume edition of Graves’s *Collected Poems* (1995-1999), there is a semi-colon after ‘wit’.¹⁹⁶

The final version of the above stanza as it appears in *On English Poetry* is, undeniably, a good deal tighter and more economical than the original. In the section following ‘Surface Faults’, Graves identifies the three ‘technical considerations’ that informed his revision of the poem, ‘besides an attempt at a greater accuracy of meaning and implication than the first slap-dash arrangement of words’.¹⁹⁷ As well as being anxious to avoid

¹⁹¹ Ibid. p.105.

¹⁹² Ibid. p.105.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p.105.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p.106.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p.106.

¹⁹⁶ CP3, p.325.

¹⁹⁷ OEP, p.106.

‘unintentional echoes’ (‘as for example, “*In club or messroom... indulging*”’) and word combinations that ‘interfere with easy breathing’ (“indulge salacious”), Graves reveals that he was attempting ‘to vary the vowel sounds so far as is consistent with getting the right shade of meaning’.¹⁹⁸ It is precisely this kind of obsessive attention to detail that has, for the most part, earned Graves a reputation for being one of the greatest revisers in the history of modern poetry, along with Yeats, Auden and Marianne Moore.¹⁹⁹ On the other hand, the ever-cynical Philip Larkin maintains that Graves’s ‘inability to leave a poem alone’²⁰⁰ signals both a lack of creative self-assurance and one of his primary weaknesses as a poet. Larkin’s great predecessor, Thomas Hardy, expressed similar mystification at Graves’s seemingly neurotic approach to revision when the young poet visited him in Dorset late in the summer of 1920 (by which time the writing of *On English Poetry* would have been well underway), confessing: “‘I have never in my life taken more than three, or perhaps four, drafts for a poem. I am afraid of it losing its freshness.’”²⁰¹ Referring to this meeting in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), F. R. Leavis draws attention to Hardy’s ‘precritical innocence’,²⁰² implicitly contrasting it with Graves’s post-critical self-consciousness.

Revision in *On English Poetry*, however, is not simply a matter of applying ‘putty’ to surface faults. According to Graves, the poet ‘creates in passion, then by a reverse process of analyzing, he tests the implied suggestions and corrects them on common sense principles so as to make them apply universally’.²⁰³ This ‘reverse process’ suggests more than emotion recollected in tranquillity. It sounds instead like a ‘process of depersonalization’²⁰⁴ similar to the one described by Eliot in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, whereby the private occasion that gives rise to the poem is systematically obscured from the reader’s view – without, it should be added, ever being fully expunged from the text itself. The logic of this desire

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. pp.106-7.

¹⁹⁹ Michael Schmidt, for example, calls Graves ‘a reviser *par excellence*’. Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998), p.679.

²⁰⁰ Philip Larkin, ‘Graves Superior’, *Further Requirements*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.183.

²⁰¹ *GTAT*(29), p.249.

²⁰² F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1932, rpt 1972), p.48.

²⁰³ *OED*, p.13.

²⁰⁴ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.17.

to express personal experience in a wholly impersonal, ‘universally’ accessible way is, in a sense, circular, since the poet’s conflicting selves are always, necessarily, the product of *public* forces. Graves proposes that they are ‘formed’ within the poet ‘by his relation to [the] various groups’²⁰⁵ that he encounters in the everyday world. This reminds us that Graves’s poetic aim at this time was to become no less than the ‘spokesman of that larger group-mind of his culture’. Elsewhere he argues that such an aim is both dependent on, and perpetually threatened by, a degree of arrogant individualism that should be kept in check lest it alienate the reader, who must be kept on side: ‘The danger of this very necessary arrogance is that it is likely so to intrude the poet’s personal eccentricities into what he writes [so] that the reader recognizes them and does not read the “I” as being the voice of universality’²⁰⁶. Graves’s mistrust of the idiosyncratic poetic voice brings to mind not only Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry but also Yeats’s hatred of ‘the literature of the point of view’²⁰⁷ and his conviction that ‘all that is personal soon rots’²⁰⁸. In this respect, at least, it seems that Graves was very much in line with a wider reaction against the liberties taken by those poets associated with Aestheticism and the *fin de siècle*.

Indeed, more so than his often cryptic modernist contemporaries, Graves feels an acute responsibility to the basic social function of language. Among other things, this means resisting the temptation to write poems that sacrifice sense to musicality or unrestrained verbal play. Such a rule is as much a source of frustration for Graves as it is a guiding principle:

One of the most embarrassing limitations of poetry is that the language you use is not your own to do entirely what you like with. Times actually come when in the conscious stage of composition you have to consult a dictionary or another writer as to what word you are going to use... It is intolerable to feel so bound compared with the freedom of a musician or a sculptor; in spite of the exactions of that side of the art; the poet cannot escape into mere rhythmic sound; there is always the dead load of sense to drag about with him.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ *OEP*, p.123.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p.136.

²⁰⁷ Yeats, ‘A General Introduction to my Work’, *Selected Criticism*, p.256.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p.266.

²⁰⁹ *OEP*, p.69.

In Graves's view, the very impersonality of language, its essentially *a priori* nature, prevents (or rather should prevent) the poet from approaching the kind of expressionistic freedoms that are available to musicians and painters. As Patrick McGuinness²¹⁰ points out, Graves differs with his interdisciplinary modernist peers over the viability of drawing from the plastic or the musical arts when it comes to formulating his poetics. Regardless of the parallels (or lack thereof) between poetry and other art-forms, Graves does not find it necessary to force syntax and rhythm into strange new shapes, as Eliot and Pound so often do, in order to accommodate the pressure of an increasingly chaotic 'modern' reality. On the contrary one senses that, for Graves, this pressure makes the 'limitations' of sense-making all the more imperative.²¹¹ However, as that striking phrase 'dead load of sense' suggests, such an ideal does not stop Graves from feeling the pull of nonsense verse and poetry that privileges sound over sense. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in 'The Poet in the Nursery,' the first poem of Graves's debut collection, *Over the Brazier*, which was published by Harold Monroe at his Poetry Bookshop in 1916. This early lyric is about 'the poet's birth' in another sense and suggests that Graves's entrance into the world of poetry was at once a coming of age *and* a regression.

The poem describes the experience of a child lost among the shelves of an 'ancient poet', who wanders the library tugging on his 'long white beard' and 'gently grumbling / That rhymes were troublesome things and never there'.²¹² The child, who is (coincidentally enough) in the process of writing 'a tragic poem' about the death of a wicked old man, stumbles upon a book of verse and excitedly hides it beneath his clothes. His ensuing journey from the 'dim library' underworld to the illumination of the nursery looks ahead, in many ways, to the similarly autobiographical poem 'Escape' (published later on in the same year), in which another Gravesian persona flees from the authoritative grasp of 'policeman ghosts'. In 'The Poet in the Nursery' this

²¹⁰ Patrick McGuinness, 'Robert Graves, Modernism, and the "Poetic body"', *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. Patrick J. Quinn (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), p.48.

²¹¹ As Lionel Trilling succinctly puts it, Graves 'has a passion for the old passions of the temperate zone – his impulse is all against being overwhelmed'. Trilling, 'A Ramble on Graves', *A Gathering of Fugitives* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957), p.29.

²¹² *CPI*, p.3.

'flight' turns out to be another form of 'fight' as the young poet claims the book and, by extension, the art of poetry, for himself:

I took the book to bed with me and gloated,
 Learning the lines that seemed to sound most grand;
 So soon the lively emerald green was coated
 With intimate dark stains from my hot hand,
 While round the nursery for long months there floated
 Wonderful words no one could understand.²¹³

We are not a million miles away from Roland Barthes's theory of *jouissance* or readership 'bliss'²¹⁴ in this passage, with its feverishly sexualised description of a reading experience apparently unimpeded by 'the dead load of sense'. Indeed, by the end of the poem, the words that the child relishes for their strangeness and extravagance have become, literally, free-floating signifiers at play among the toys of the nursery, suggesting an interdependent liberation of reader and text. Though there is nothing in 'The Poet in the Nursery' to indicate that the smuggled volume contains nonsense verse, it may as well do, since the joy that the child takes in it clearly has more to do with mischief, mystery and musicality than straightforward meaning.²¹⁵ His Yeatsian delight in the 'sound' of those 'grand' lines, for example, is particularly well communicated through, among other things, Graves's intricate use of alliteration throughout the above stanza: 'the *book to bed*', '*Learning the lines that seemed to sound*', '*hot hand*', '*Wonderful words*'. The triple end-rhyme of 'grand', 'hand' and 'understand' also suggests some kind of interrelation between mind and body; as though the act of understanding is at its most 'grand' when it is 'proved', as Keats put it, 'upon our pulses'.²¹⁶ Similarly, the parallel rhyme of 'gloated,' 'coated' and 'floated' implies that transcendence is achieved through triumphant pleasure (over the careworn adult world) and the 'intimate' bodily secretions that such transgressions engender.²¹⁷

²¹³ Ibid. p.3.

²¹⁴ Roland Barthes, 'from *The Pleasure of the Text*' (1975), *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 1993, rpt 2000), pp.404-414.

²¹⁵ It is worth remembering that, in the year of 'The Poet in the Nursery's' publication, Tristan Tzara added his Dadaist 'hobbyhorse' to the nursery of European modernism, while James Joyce famously opened *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with a stream of semi-comprehensible 'baby-talk'.

²¹⁶ 'To J. H. Reynolds', 3 May 1818, *Letters of John Keats*, p.93.

²¹⁷ Many years later in his Clark Lecture, 'These Be Your Gods, O Israel!', Graves would use similarly sexual language to describe his susceptibility to the charms of Dylan Thomas's highly

Interestingly, Graves wrote this lyric a good year or so before Rivers introduced him to the writings of Freud, where he would have found a comparable vision of infant sexuality; a vision that he later emphatically rejects on ‘commonsense’²¹⁸ grounds.

Given the author’s commitment to communicability, it comes as no surprise that ‘The Poet in the Nursery’ does not fully enact the experience it describes: Graves’s lyric, after all, *does* make sense – it contains no words that we cannot understand. Though the poem is narrated from the perspective of the child it noticeably stops short at the nursery door, hinting at those ‘wonderful words’ instead of reporting them directly. By the same token, if the realm of experience that Graves evokes is a linguistic one, it is also, paradoxically, beyond articulation. The same can be said, of course, about poetic creativity; a phenomenon that is intimately bound up with words but curiously resistant to them when it comes to the business of explanation. In *On English Poetry*, Graves argues that ‘the actual psychology of creative art is country still pictured in our text-books as Terra Incognita, the rumoured abode of Phoenix and Manticor’.²¹⁹ As an account of youthful poetic inspiration, ‘The Poet in the Nursery’ alludes to the uncharted territory that Graves speaks of without actually leading us through it. Indeed, it would be feasible to argue that the poem is all the more successful for *not* taking this tack. *On English Poetry*, on the other hand, is a book dedicated to the task of navigating the ‘psychology of creative art’; albeit in an ‘irregular’ fashion and ‘from evidence mainly subjective’. As Graves puts it, ‘The spirit of adventure made me feel myself a regular John Mandeville’.²²⁰ In her admiring review, A. Williams-Ellis argues that Graves’s book is significant precisely because it represents ‘the first serious attempt made by a “working poet” to [stage] a subjective analysis of the actual processes of inspiration’.²²¹ An anonymous reviewer in the *TLS* echoed this observation:

musical, but semantically loose, poetry: ‘[he] was drunk with melody, and what the words were, he cared not... and when I listened to his broadcasting, I had to keep a tight hold of myself to avoid being seduced’. *CWP*, p.237.

²¹⁸ *MOD*, p.12.

²¹⁹ *OEP*, p.53.

²²⁰ *Ibid.* p.53.

²²¹ A. Williams-Ellis, ‘Poets and Poetry’, *Spectator*, 5 August 1922, CXXIX, p.184.

Many English poets – Campion, Coleridge, Patmore, Mr. Bridges, and others – have written on the principles of versification, though the majority are content to smile benignly at the orthoepist. A few – Sidney, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Arnold, Poe – were either keen experimenters in the art of poetry or were profoundly interested in its sources, methods, values and effects. Very few, however, have attempted to trace their own poetic practice to its source; to distinguish and codify its incentives; to scrutinize and report on a poem in the making; or to theorize on their own creative souls.²²²

In the brief concluding part of this chapter, I will closely look at two neighbouring sections from *On English Poetry* in which Graves analyses his own work. Unlike the piece on ‘Cynics and Romantics’, which deals almost exclusively with the fine tuning of surface details, each of these accounts represents an attempt to reconstruct and re-imagine the psychological origins of a particular lyric.

IV. ‘TERRA INCOGNITA’: ‘THE GENERAL ELLIOTT’ AND ‘THE GOD CALLED POETRY’

The first of these two sections is entitled ‘The General Elliott’ and takes as its subject Graves’s ballad of the same name²²³ (which was originally published in the *Spectator* in April 1921 and later appeared in the pre-‘Interlude’ section of *Whipperginny*). Given its publishing history, we know that ‘The General Elliott’ would have been composed very shortly before Graves wrote his analysis of it in *On English Poetry*. The poem, which is quoted in full at the beginning of the chapter, describes a ‘tavern sign’ which hung outside the General Elliott pub near Boar’s Hill and its depiction of a mysterious military figure, from whom the inn presumably took its name. It is thought, the first stanza suggests, that the General sustained fatal wounds ‘in victory’s fierce pursuit’; though nobody can say for sure which battle he fell

²²² ‘Excursions and Alarums: Review of *On English Poetry* by Robert Graves’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 September 1922, p.580.

²²³ The poem appears under the title ‘The General Elliott’ (as opposed to ‘Elliott’) in *Complete Poems, Volume 1* since Graves mysteriously decided to drop one of the l’s from his protagonist’s surname when he reprinted the lyric in his 1961 *Collected Poems*.

in, or, for that matter, whether he simply died of alcoholism. With his pipe and a 'tankard of brown ale / That spills a generous foam'²²⁴ he is described as a 'foolish' and 'bold' surveyor of the surrounding village and countryside. The General's strange, mythical authority is conveyed in the following stanza, which, with its oblique reference to the annual crowning of the King of the Wood, seems to offer further confirmation that Graves was immersed in Frazer's *Golden Bough* at this time:

No upstart hero may usurp
That honoured swinging seat;
His seasons pass with pipe and glass
Until the tale's complete.²²⁵

It would appear that this roguish, shambling figure has entered Oxfordshire folklore both as a patron saint of the more drunken patrons ('Oft-times he drinks, they say, and winks / At drunk men lurching home') and as a kind of puckish lookout who will preside over the landscape 'Until the tale's complete'. This last line, with its implication of an ongoing narrative, obliquely prefigures the 'one story and one story only' of 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' and, of course, *The White Goddess*. In addition to foreshadowing his own later work, Graves poem also anticipates John Crowe Ransom's much-anthologised 1924 lyric, 'Captain Carpenter', which features a similarly ridiculous, but oddly sympathetic, military figure. Like the General, who is 'holed through and through with shot' and 'hacked' deep 'by a sabre sweep',²²⁶ Captain Carpenter is subjected to unspeakable, almost cartoon-like acts of violence as he is systematically dismembered and disfigured throughout the course of the poem.²²⁷ Later on, in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Graves and Riding point out that

Captain Carpenter is not an easily defined or felt subject, neither a particular historical figure nor yet a complete allegory. He confounds the emotions of the reader instead of simplifying them and provides no

²²⁴ *OEP*, p.56.

²²⁵ *Ibid.* p.56.

²²⁶ *Ibid.* p.55.

²²⁷ John Crowe Ransom, 'Captain Carpenter', *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1969, rpt 1991), pp.44-6.

answer to the one question which the reader will ask himself: “Who or what, particularly, is Captain Carpenter?”²²⁸

This description is just as applicable to Graves’s poem as it is to Ransom’s; as is the question: ‘Who or what, particularly, is The General Elliott?’

Before quoting his poem in the account of it that appears in *On English Poetry*, Graves reasons that ‘It is impossible to be sure of one’s ground when theorizing solely from the work of others’; an allusion, no doubt, to his reading of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ in the previous chapter. As if this was not justification enough, Graves goes on to cite a letter that he claims to have received from an ‘American colonel’ who came across his poem in the *Spectator*. In this brief note, which is, again, quoted in full, the anonymous colonel reports that he recently encountered a ‘duplicate presentment’ of the General nailed to a tree while ‘returning across fields to Oxford from a visit to Boar’s Hill’²²⁹ (once again, note the Frazerian imagery - imagery that would later be replicated in *The White Goddess* and the figure of the ‘Naked King crucified to the lopped oak’).²³⁰ However, judging by the description, this particular version of the General bears puzzlingly little resemblance to the figure portrayed in Graves’s poem: ‘He did not grip the tankard of brown ale that spills a generous foam – nor did his seasons seem to pass with pipe and glass – and alas, nor did paint keep his tarnished buttons bright.’²³¹ Despite these obvious discrepancies, the colonel posits that the General’s identity might not be such a mystery after all:

In spite of your assertion, is the general’s tale not already complete? Was he not (like me) but a “temporary officer”? Or have I seen a spurious General Elliott? He *should* not die; the post from which he views the world is all too lonely for his eyes to be permitted to close upon that scene, albeit the churchyard slabs do not come within the range... May *I* help to restore him?²³²

What are we to make of this strange, riddling letter and Graves’s decision to include it as a prelude to his analysis of the poem? While the colonel begins

²²⁸ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, ed. Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 1927-28, rpt 2002), p.52.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* p.56-7.

²³⁰ *WG*, p.439.

²³¹ *OEP*, p.57.

²³² *Ibid.* p.57.

his note by claiming that he has seen a 'duplicate presentment' of the General, he concludes by proposing that he himself is a kind of duplicate of the duplicate: 'Was he not (like me) a temporary officer?' This peculiar doubling (which, incidentally, is very much in keeping with the name 'Elliott') creates a Borgesian hall-of-mirrors effect that brings to mind the disorientating reversals of 'Interlude' and serves to wrong-foot the reader who is expecting a straightforward exegesis of the poem. Whether the colonel's letter is the genuine article, then, or merely a fiction devised to complicate the General's identity even further and justify Graves's lengthy discussion of his own work is very much open to question. As Anthony Thwaite points out, 'one isn't always convinced about the accuracy of Graves's sources'.²³³ If the correspondence is indeed a fake, it seems quite plausible that Graves took his inspiration from Coleridge who also made ingenious use of a fictitious letter from an anonymous 'friend' to further his theory of the Imagination in Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*.²³⁴

Graves's eventual analysis of the poem takes the form of a reply to the colonel's note. It begins with one of the most revealing passages to appear in *On English Poetry* on the subject of the author's own creative process:

The poet very seldom writes about what he is observing at the moment. Usually a poem that has been for a long while maturing unsuspected in the unconscious mind, is brought to birth by an outside shock, often quite a trivial one, but one which – as midwives would say – leaves a distinct and peculiar birthmark on the child.²³⁵

So the poet's rival sub-personalities are brought into sudden, unexpected order by 'an outside shock' of some kind, much as the thought process that gives rise to a dream might be triggered, as Freud puts it, by some 'trivial experience' of the previous day.²³⁶ In the case of 'The General Elliott', this shock was the ostensibly 'trivial' sight of a pub-sign that read: 'The General Elliott. Morrell's Ales and Stouts.' Despite his vivid description of the General's image in the poem, Graves admits to having no memory of any

²³³ Anthony Thwaite, *Twentieth Century English Poetry: An Introduction* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p.96.

²³⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Oxford Authors*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.310-13.

²³⁵ *OEP*, p.57.

²³⁶ Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.188.

illustration on the sign itself. He only remembers that, on apprehending the signboard for a second time, 'a whole lot of floating material [became] crystallized in my mind'.²³⁷ It is the poet's reaction to the sign and what he makes of it in the ensuing poem, rather than the sign itself, which is of primary importance. In this respect, Graves seems to be drawing once again on Coleridge and his conception of the Miltonic, as opposed to the Shakespearean, poet who 'attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal'.²³⁸ For the author of 'The General Elliott', this meant the spontaneous arrival of a more or less complete stanza in the poet's mind. Graves quotes it in full:

Was it Schellenberg, General Elliott,
Or Minden or Waterloo
Where the bullet struck your shoulderknot,
And the sabre shore your arm,
And the bayonet ran you through?²³⁹

These impulsive lines were, however, unsatisfactory to the poet, even after a further 'five drafts'. Despite the unifying power of the unanticipated 'outside shock', then, it seems that there is still much for the poet-chairman to do. According to Graves, the various 'conflicting emotions' were not 'properly balanced' in these early versions of the poem. In order to demonstrate how this was eventually achieved, he goes on to identify some of those 'floating materials' that surfaced from his unconscious at the instant of rereading the sign.

First of all, Graves claims that the sight of the sign led him to think of a 'real' general whom he greatly admired. At the same time, however, he maintains that it also simultaneously aroused his 'disgust for the incompetence and folly of several other generals'²⁴⁰ under whom he had served *and* his affection for an 'extraordinary thick-witted, kind hearted militia Colonel, who was fond enough of the bottle... but somehow got through his job surprisingly well'.²⁴¹ The idyllic setting of the inn, meanwhile, apparently reminded

²³⁷ Ibid. p.58.

²³⁸ Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p.325.

²³⁹ *OEP*, p.58.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. p.59.

²⁴¹ Ibid. p.59.

Graves of his own wartime ‘hope of settling down to a real country life’ after ‘nearly five years of soldiering’.²⁴² Indeed, he goes on to reveal that it made him wonder whether perhaps the pub itself was set up by a like-minded ‘old soldier’. Bearing in mind his enthusiasm for military history, Graves reports that he was also perturbed by his inability to identify the battle in which the General fell. Last of all, Graves claims that the scene called to mind both his own love of ales and a ‘warning inscription’ he once saw ‘on a tomb at Winchester over a private soldier who died of drink’.²⁴³ After listing the poem’s various psychological sources, Graves concedes that his account is far from exhaustive, adding: ‘There are all sorts of other sentiments mixed up, which still elude me’.²⁴⁴ This acknowledgement of partial failure is particularly interesting given that Graves opens his chapter on ‘The General Elliott’ with the observation: ‘It is impossible to be sure of one’s ground when theorizing solely on the work of others’; as if to suggest that theorising from one’s own work somehow precludes, or at least lessens, this inherent uncertainty.

By foregrounding the incomplete nature of his interpretation, Graves echoes Freud’s admission following the analysis of his famous ‘specimen dream’: ‘I do not claim to have uncovered the meaning of this dream in its entirety or that my interpretation is complete.’²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, as a backstage pass into the modern poet’s mind, Graves’s (apparently) candid self-analysis is, for all its imperfections, almost without rival in the history of poetic theory. The most obvious contender, or closest relative, is perhaps Edgar Allan Poe’s 1846 essay ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, which Graves cites as a forerunner to his own commentary:

Poe’s account of the series of cold-blooded deliberations that evolved “The Raven” is sometimes explained as an attempt in the spirit of “Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no lies”, to hoodwink a too curious Public. A juster suggestion would be that Poe was quite honest in his record, but that the powerful nature of his emotions which combined to produced the poem prompted him afterwards to un-intentional dishonesty in telling the story. In my account of “The General Elliott”

²⁴² Ibid. p.59.

²⁴³ Ibid. p.60.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. p.61.

²⁴⁵ Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.131.

there may be similar examples of false rationalization long after the event, but that is for others to discover...²⁴⁶

Given that he precedes his reading of 'The General Elliott' with a baffling and possibly bogus letter, Graves himself appears to invite the charges of hoodwinking that he defends Poe against. However, whereas Poe's essay takes the form of a seemingly seamless argument, Graves's more disjointed account reads like an exercise in free-association. Moreover, his contention that the poet necessarily rationalizes the poem's irrational beginnings clearly owes something to Freud's theory of 'secondary elaboration' or 'processing', whereby the analysand translates his or her dream into commonsense terms. As we shall see, this idea will become particularly central to Graves's theory of revision in *Poetic Unreason*.

In the chapter that follows 'The General Elliott', Graves focuses on an earlier lyric from *Country Sentiment* entitled 'The God Called Poetry'. In a letter to Siegfried Sassoon dated 11 January 1918, Graves describes the recent appearance of this poem with a curious mixture of childlike excitement and tough-minded pragmatism:

I have just written a poem that Robbie says is a masterpiece. It seemed alright when I casually examined it the morning afterwards. I'd written it on the back of a telegram from Practician and the cover of an old chequebook: and still I think it's rather a hit. Shall send it somewhere and get increment. Called 'The God Called Poetry'.²⁴⁷

According to Graves, this poem provided 'the first impulse to more than one of the main contentions in [*On English Poetry*], and at the same time supplies perhaps the clearest example I can give of the thought machinery that with greater luck and cunning may produce something like Poetry'.²⁴⁸ The phrase 'thought machinery' echoes Freud's references to 'the machinery of the mind'²⁴⁹ in *Interpreting Dreams* and looks ahead to William Empson's use of the term 'intellectual machinery'²⁵⁰ in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. By highlighting its key role in the genesis of *On English Poetry*, Graves sets up

²⁴⁶ *OEP*, p.61.

²⁴⁷ 'To Siegfried Sassoon,' 11 January 1918, *IBI*, p.91.

²⁴⁸ *OEP*, p.62.

²⁴⁹ Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.15.

²⁵⁰ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p.238.

‘The God Called Poetry’ as a kind of rudimentary *ars poetica*. Although he claims to have written the poem without any conscious knowledge of the symbolism it employs, Graves reveals that he had ‘a vision’ in his mind of ‘the God of Poetry having two heads like Janus, one savage, scowling and horrible, the face of Blackbeard the Pirate, the other mild and gracious, that of John the Evangelist’.²⁵¹ Like poetic inspiration itself, the God is both potentially omnipresent (‘He sings to you from windowsills’)²⁵² and maddeningly elusive (‘where you seek him he is not’).²⁵³ In this respect, he is clearly another patriarchal precursor to the equally capricious triple Goddess of Graves’s later work.

The Janus-faced deity of ‘The God Called Poetry’ instructs the poet in two versions of the egotistical sublime, advising him to be at once unremittingly ‘harsh’ in his manipulation of reality, like Coleridge’s Milton, and, at the same time, to be carefree and casual, gently persuading the particulars of experience to ‘follow you along / Graciously with no doubt or pain’.²⁵⁴ In his account of the poem’s conception, Graves quotes the final stanza in full:

Thus speaking from his double head
The glorious fearful monster said,
“I am *Yes* and I am *No*
Black as pitch and white as snow;
Love me, hate me, reconcile
Hate with love, perfect with vile,
So equal justice shall be done
And life shared between moon and sun.
Nature for you shall curse or smile;
A poet you shall be, my son.”²⁵⁵

As a metaphor for the kind of poetic double-talk that Graves attributes to Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi* and Keats in ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, the God’s oracular monologue (or duologue, rather) provides a suitably suggestive source for the conflict theories of *On English Poetry*. The Kiplingesque coda (with its echoes of ‘you’ll be a Man, my son!’ from ‘If’)

²⁵¹ *OEP*, p.62.

²⁵² *CP1*, p.82.

²⁵³ *Ibid.* p.82.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p.82.

²⁵⁵ *OEP*, p.62-3.

and the 'Love me, hate me' injunction of line five add to the impression that this god (like most gods) is very much a father-figure, and a Freudian one at that. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), for example, we find a plausible prototype in the form of the totemic father, who is both murdered and mourned by his envious sons.²⁵⁶ Given Rivers's immersion in the interrelated fields of psychoanalysis and anthropology, it seems highly likely that this relatively early text of Freud's would have been among the materials that Graves absorbed under the guidance of his mentor (especially since it contains a reference to Rivers himself).²⁵⁷ Indeed, in *The Meaning of Dreams* Graves refers to Freud as 'both the good fairy and the bad fairy... of a new science of dream interpretation'.²⁵⁸ Then again, perhaps the fork-tongued idol of 'The God Called Poetry' could be read as a dream-like amalgam of Graves's two post-war mentors: Lawrence, the uncompromising, 'god-like' man-of-action and Rivers, the patient, sympathetic listener. Either way, the poem clearly explores an earlier version of the multiple-paternity theme that Graves went on to dramatise in lyrics like 'The Poet's Birth' in the period immediately following *On English Poetry's* publication.

In the case of 'The God Called Poetry', the 'outside shock' or trigger that set the poem in motion was 'the sight of ... a guard of honour drilling on the barrack-square of a camp near Liverpool'.²⁵⁹ Graves recalls that he was waiting to enter 'the Court-Martial room' at the time, where he was expected to attend the trial of a soldier who was being charged with desertion after attempting, unsuccessfully, to plead conscientious objection. He adds: 'I had long been pondering about certain paradoxical aspects of Poetry and, particularly, contrasting the roaring genius of Christopher Marlowe with that of his gentle contemporary Shakespeare'.²⁶⁰ We are reminded of the more technical comparison that Eliot stages in his essay 'Christopher Marlowe' (1919), whereby Marlowe's genius for 'terribly serious, even savage comic

²⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, ed. Maud Ellmann (London: Penguin, 2005), p.143.

²⁵⁷ We find a possible reference to Freud's study (which was first translated into English in 1918) in a chapter of *On English Poetry* entitled 'Poetry and Primitive Magic,' which contains the observation: 'Poetry was further encouraged by the restrictions of the *taboo*, which made definite reference to certain people, gods and objects, unlucky.' *OEP*, p.20.

²⁵⁸ *MOD*, p.11.

²⁵⁹ *OEP*, p.63.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p.63.

humour' is distinguished from Shakespeare's Dantesque 'concision'.²⁶¹ As he stood by the doorway waiting, Graves describes how he imagined Marlowe in the place of the officer in command of the ceremonial drill, 'strutting, ranting, shouting and cursing – but making the men *move*'²⁶². He then tried, unsuccessfully, to imagine Shakespeare in the same role, concluding that the Bard 'would never have done to command a guard of honour' because he reminded Graves too much of a brother-officer who 'hated all the "sergeant-major business" and used sometimes on this barrack square to be laughing so much at the absurd pomposity of the drill as hardly to be able to control his word of command'.²⁶³ As we have seen from his account of 'Cynics and Romantics', Graves himself is always very much in control of his 'word of command', at least when it comes to writing poetry, indicating, perhaps, a sympathy with Marlowe. It also becomes clear, with the revelation that the brother-officer in question was also a fellow poet nicknamed 'Mad Jack' for his remarkable 'fighting feats',²⁶⁴ that Graves is referring to his (then) friend Sassoon. As a corollary, he recalls wondering to himself what Sassoon and Shakespeare would do if they found themselves in his situation outside the Court-Martial room, adding: 'Marlowe, of course, would thunder "two years" at the accused with enormous relish, investing the cause of militarism with a magnificent poetry.'²⁶⁵ Graves claims that it was with these thoughts in mind that he sat down in the quarters that he had once shared with 'Mad Jack' to write 'The God Called Poetry'. Despite its Frazerian 'primitive' overtones, then, Graves's poem stemmed from public and social settings, as well as quasi-military ones. Far from being a White Goddess-like deity from the pre-historic past, its central figure is clearly implicated in and evoked by the public world inhabited by the poet at the time.

²⁶¹ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pp.123-4.

²⁶² *Ibid.* p.63.

²⁶³ *Ibid.* p.63.

²⁶⁴ *OEP*, p.64.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.64.

CHAPTER 2**SECONDARY ELABORATIONS:
*POETIC UNREASON (1925)***

I. 'APULEIUS IN OXFORD': GENESIS, CRITICAL RECEPTION AND *THE MEANING OF DREAMS*

After suffering from increasingly severe bouts of shellshock in the early part of 1921, Graves finally conceded to seek formal treatment despite his initial misgivings about the effect it would have upon his poetry. By March of the same year he had been referred by Rivers to a London nerve specialist named McDowell, who strongly advised him against the continuation of his studies. On learning of his diagnosis, Graves's tutor at Oxford, Sir Walter Raleigh, similarly suggested that he terminate his BA degree and, in his own time, write a thesis under the title 'The Illogical Element in English Poetry, with a study of its modification by Classical, and its exploitation by Romantic Writers' instead. In June 1921, shortly after completing his final draft of *On English Poetry*, Graves, Nancy and their two young children moved from Boar's Hill to World's End Cottage in Islip. Here the twenty-six year old poet began work on his new project, a study which, in addition to earning him an honorary B.Litt degree, would eventually be published by Cecil Palmer in February 1925 as his second major work of literary criticism, *Poetic Unreason*. The writing process itself, however, went far from smoothly. For one thing, Graves found that he was deeply uncomfortable with the strict 'academic style'¹ in which he was now expected to write. As he puts it in his 'Author's Note' to *Poetic Unreason*: 'the thesis outgrew its title and sobriety and since 1921 has been sitting on my shoulders like a Proteus constantly changing shape; I have cast and re-cast it nine times'.² Then again, an undated letter from Graves to Edward Marsh written sometime in July 1922 suggests that the experience was not all bad: 'I am now getting at a very exciting part of the study of poetry', he writes, 'in a second book called *The Illogical Element in Poetry*'.³ Indeed, he goes on to reveal that 'Prose I enjoy writing at last, but it takes me so long, every word being rewritten about eight times and then not pleasing.' Similarly, in another undated letter to Edmund Blunden posted a couple of months later, Graves declares: 'I am full of bounce intellectually... I

¹ *GTAT*(29), p.291.

² *PU*, 'Author's Note'.

³ *SLI*, pp.141-2.

have my teeth into Shakespeare's secret sorrows at present, *The Tempest* is yielding up its dead to me'.⁴ If *Poetic Unreason* was, as Graves claims, the product of countless visions and revisions, it was also clearly born out of genuine intellectual excitement and a keen sense of breaking new ground.

As both a 'sober development'⁵ of the ideas that Graves explored in *On English Poetry* and 'a downright denial of the views tentatively and often half-humorously held in that volume of note-book reflections'⁶ *Poetic Unreason* represents an attempt to revise and systematise the wayward theorising of his earlier critical work. Although John Crowe Ransom grandly called it 'the most penetrating book yet written about English poetry'⁷ in *Fugitive*, the anonymous *TLS* reviewer who criticised Graves for 'sketchiness', 'irresponsibility' and 'the spirit of harum-scarum which pervades his enterprise',⁸ was, perhaps, rather more representative of the book's reception in the literary press. D. S. Mirsky in *The London Mercury*, for example, found *Poetic Unreason* to be 'stimulating and arresting reading'; though also he proposed that 'Mr. Graves fails to see that what most modern poets are after is not expression of their subconscious selves or the liberation of their suppressed impulses, but something much more amusing and worthwhile – the discovery of new patterns of words'.⁹ In *The Nation and The Athenaeum*, meanwhile, Bonamy Dobrée argued that Graves 'has something interesting to say: but since his thoughts are conflicting, and he has not resolved the conflict, the result is an aggravating, stimulating, attractive, unreadable book'.¹⁰ This description brings to mind another 'crazy book'¹¹ that Graves would write some twenty-five years later: *The White Goddess*; a volume which, as Fran Brearton points out, clearly owes a debt to *Poetic Unreason*'s 'methodology and approach'.¹² Later on, in his introduction to *The Common Asphodel*,

⁴ *Ibid.* p.144.

⁵ *PU*, 'Author's Note'.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.1.

⁷ John Crowe Ransom, 'Prose: A Doctrine of Relativity', *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and John Hindle (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p.32.

⁸ Anonymous, 'Poetic Unreason', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 April 1925, p.236.

⁹ D. S. Mirsky, 'Literary History and Criticism', *The London Mercury*, 1925, XII:71, p.548.

¹⁰ Bonamy Dobrée, 'Robert Graves, Gamma; or, What Shall it Profit a Man?', *The Nation and The Athenaeum*, 11 April 1925, XXXVII:2, p.50.

¹¹ *WG*, p.xx.

¹² Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, p.89.

Graves himself dismissed much of *Poetic Unreason* as being ‘a tangle of contradictions or difficult evasions of contradiction’.¹³ Interestingly, this dubious reputation did not prevent it from finding a deeply sympathetic audience among some of the most significant poets and critics to emerge from the 1920s. In addition to Ransom, with whom Graves was still regularly corresponding, William Empson,¹⁴ W. H. Auden¹⁵ and Louis MacNeice¹⁶ all studied the book intensely and felt the sway of its influence upon their work.

In the time that it took him to complete his heavily-revised manuscript, Graves produced three collections of poetry, *Whipperginny* (1923), *The Feather Bed* (1923) and *Mock Beggar Hall* (1924). He also edited a selection of John Crowe Ransom’s poems, entitled *Grace After Meat* (1924), and published *The Meaning of Dreams* (1924), which is described in *Poetic Unreason* as ‘a simply written study of the mechanics of imaginative psychology’ to be read, along with his collection of poems *Mock Beggar Hall* (1924), as ‘an introduction to the present volume’.¹⁷ As Richard Perceval Graves has pointed out, these remarks reveal that Graves regarded *The Meaning of Dreams* as a ‘necessary link’¹⁸ in the sequential arrangement of his early work and undermine the dismissive comments that he would later level at the book in the 1929 edition of *Goodbye to All That*: ‘I had published *The Meaning of Dreams*, which was intended to be a popular shillingsworth for the railway bookstall; but I went to the wrong publisher and he issued it at five shillings. Being too simply written for the informed public, and too expensive for the ignorant public to which it was addressed, it fell flat; as indeed it deserved.’¹⁹ The motivation behind the book’s inception, however, goes rather deeper than the author’s proclaimed desire to fill a gap in the market for readable introductions to the new science.

¹³ *CA*, p.viii.

¹⁴ Christopher Norris, *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1978), pp.129-130.

¹⁵ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.76.

¹⁶ Peter McDonald, ‘Louis MacNeice’s Early Poetry (1924-1930)’; W. H. Auden, *The Map of All My Youth: Early Works, Friends and influences*, ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.152.

¹⁷ *PU*, ‘Author’s Note’.

¹⁸ Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic*, p.287.

¹⁹ *GTAT*(29), p.292.

According to Miranda Seymour, *The Meaning of Dreams* was ‘impulsively’²⁰ started shortly after Rivers’s unexpected death in June 1922, about a year into Graves’s work on *Poetic Unreason*, and was written as an ‘extension of [the] dialogues’²¹ that had taken place between the two men over the preceding months and years. These dialogues almost certainly revolved around *Conflict and Dream*, the book that Rivers was busily writing in the period leading up to his death. Though it was left unfinished and remained unpublished until 1923, Graves was enthusiastic about its significance even before reading the manuscript in its final form. In an undated letter to Siegfried Sassoon lamenting Rivers’s death he wrote: ‘Do you know if his new book on Dreams was finished; in a state to be published? It is about his most important work. You ought to see about it, in case it just gets forgotten.’²² By February 1923, when he eventually obtained a copy of *Conflict and Dream*, Graves was already in the process of writing his own distinctly literary version of Rivers’s study, as another undated letter to Sassoon indicates: ‘Very many thanks for *Conflict and Dream*: I find nothing in it that contradicts and much that confirms the work I’m doing now on *Conflict and Poetry*.’²³ This provisional title is, of course, strikingly different to the one that Graves would eventually choose and suggests that, as with his other critical works of the time, the book’s origins were as rooted in poetic theorising as they were in ‘imaginative psychology’. Far from being simply a cold-blooded commercial exercise, then, *The Meaning of Dreams* was written, along with its ‘companion’ volume of poetry, *Mock Beggar Hall*, as a serious attempt to work out the problematic theories that would eventually inform *Poetic Unreason*. In particular, Graves directs our attention to the last chapter, entitled ‘Dreams and Poetry’, which, he claims, acts as ‘a bridge between the two books’.²⁴ Before looking at *Poetic Unreason*, then, I will begin by briefly examining this chapter and considering its relation to the position Graves held in *On English Poetry*.

²⁰ Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge*, p.112.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.123.

²² *SLI*, p.143.

²³ *Ibid.* p.147.

²⁴ *PU*, ‘Author’s Note’.

‘Dreams and Poetry’ opens with a synopsis of a passage from *Conflict and Dream* in which Rivers meditates on the striking parallels that exist between poetic inspiration and what he calls ‘the dream state’:

It is possible to take the images of the manifest content of the manifest content of a poem and discover more or less exactly how each has been by the experience, new or old, of the poet. It is also possible, at any rate in many cases, to show how these images are symbolic expressions of some conflict which is raging in the mind of the poet, and that the real underlying meaning is very different from that which the outward imagery would suggest. Moreover, it is possible to show the occurrence of a process of condensation by means of which many different experiences are expressed by means of a simple image.²⁵

Taking his cue from Rivers’s admission that ‘I cannot give you direct evidence for this, for the obvious reason that, unfortunately, I am not a poet’,²⁶ Graves sets about providing the ‘direct evidence’ that his mentor lacked by inquiring into the ‘meaning’ of three tantalizingly ambiguous lyrics: Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ and his own 1920 poem ‘The Gnat’. Though the first of these interpretations had already appeared as a chapter in *On English Poetry*, Graves claims that it was ‘worth reprinting in an altered form’ since it had been, along with *Conflict and Dream*, ‘the jumping-off ground of this present volume’.²⁷ In the reading of the poem that appears in *The Meaning of Dreams*, Graves describes the conflict he established in *On English Poetry* in greater detail and complicates it further by introducing a third factor: Keats’s poetic ambition. By identifying the various influences behind the poem (‘Spenser’s *Faery Queen*, the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, Malory’s *Lady of the Lake*, Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*’, along with echoes of William Browne and Wordsworth) Graves demonstrates his keen awareness of the use of allusion in poetry; a practice that was now becoming widely discussed thanks to the collage techniques of *The Waste Land*.

Graves goes on to suggest that poetry was both Keats’s ‘one consolation for his troubles’ and, due to ‘a period of poetic dumbness’, a ‘cruel’ reminder of them:

²⁵ W. H. R. Rivers, *Conflict and Dream*, ed. G. Elliot Smith (London: Routledge, 1923, rpt 2003), p.148.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.149.

²⁷ *MOD*, p.136.

...the close connection of this conflict of poetic ambition on the one hand and inability to write on the other, with the Fanny Brawne conflict and the Death by Disease conflict can be clearly shown; Keats's illness threatened him with only a short and painful life in which to get his work done, and his love affairs left him in a state of such uncertainty and unhappiness that he could not make any progress in the long poems from which he hoped most reputation. Again, Fanny Brawne was just the person, Keats knew, who would be impressed if he made a great name as a poet, and so poetry if he could write it, was not only a consolation to him but actually a weapon to clear the way to Fanny's love. But he could not write.²⁸

So, in Graves's view, poetry often became impossible for Keats precisely because it appeared to represent the key, as it were, to both Fanny's heart and, if not literal, then at least literary, immortality. The stakes, in other words, were simply too high and the result was, for much of the time, creative paralysis. At the same time, however, Graves attributes the poem's dazzling economy and deceptively 'simple and even conventional dress' to the English poetic tradition that its author held so dear. Anticipating Christopher Ricks's observation that Keats 'declines the invitation to figure in the dark melodrama of *The Anxiety of Influence*',²⁹ Graves argues that, far from being a burden, his considerable poetic inheritance actually had a uniquely enabling effect. Given the complexity of his various conflicts, Graves proposes that Keats was unable to arrange his thoughts into a straightforward statement and resorted instead to the kind of 'condensed', supra-logical language that is spoken by 'King Lear, Hamlet and Shakespeare's other tragic heroes' in their more intense scenes; a mode of expression made comprehensible only by the author's respect for certain time-honoured poetic principles: 'If *La Belle Dame* had not been bound by Keats's regard for the poetic conventions of the men he admired, his ambition to be "among the English Poets" being part of the conflict, the whole thing might have appeared as a confused and disintegrated nightmare.'³⁰ So, according to Graves, poetry for Keats is potentially both consoling *and* cruel: a stay within - as much as a stay against - confusion.

Graves begins his reading of 'Kubla Khan' by boldly declaring his intention to disprove the then commonplace view that Coleridge's poem 'had

²⁸ *MOD*, p.144.

²⁹ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.159.

³⁰ *MOD*, p.145.

not and never could have any particular meaning attached to it'.³¹ Taking up the hermeneutic gauntlet, Graves claims that, far from being a work that can only be appreciated for the 'simple beauty of its images and rhythm', 'Kubla Khan' is a lyric that is ripe for interpretation: 'It is a particularly useful poem for purposes of our enquiry because, like Keats's ballad, it was written with very few alterations after the first draft, and we know a great deal about Coleridge's history at the time he wrote it.'³² As in his reading of 'La Belle Dame,' then, Graves makes it clear that he will be anchoring his analysis firmly in the wealth of biographical material that has always surrounded this famous poetic fragment. His chief sources this time are De Quincey's *Reminiscences of the English Lake Poets* (1907) and a work that is only referred to as 'Brandt['s] life of Coleridge'. Graves quotes a lengthy passage from each of these volumes: the first of which concerns the strained relationship between Coleridge, his wife and Dorothy Wordsworth, while the second elaborates on Coleridge's own account of 'Kubla Khan's' genesis. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) his obvious knowledge of the poem's background and his professed determination to uncover its specific meaning, Graves's eventual interpretation seems rather flat and crudely biographical. For the most part he does not identify and explore, as he did in his reading of Keats's ballad, the various conflicts that might have engendered the poem; nor does he pay particularly close attention to the richly suggestive language of Coleridge's lyric, choosing instead to adopt a more simplistic 'this stands for this and that for that' kind of approach. In particular, Graves posits that Coleridge identified with the figure of Kubla and that his vision of the 'pleasure dome' in the poem was actually based on the bower 'into which [he] always retired while under the influence of opium'.³³ The poem's reference to 'Ancestral voices prophesying war' are first attributed, somewhat unconvincingly, to the gloomy prophecies of Coleridge's friends as they witnessed his decline and, then, more plausibly, to the threat of war with France. Graves suggests that the image of the woman 'wailing for her demon lover' in the 'dark romantic chasm' is related to the strong feelings that

³¹ Ibid. p.145.

³² Ibid. p.146.

³³ Ibid. p.157.

Coleridge used to hold for his wife, 'who was now bitterly reproaching him for his supposed unfaithfulness'.³⁴ However, he is fairly vague about this connection and effectively abandons it ('but I will not insist on this interpretation') as soon as it has been formulated.

Graves goes on to admit that he also finds the significance of the 'caves of ice' perplexing, though he ventures that they could be symbolic of the poet's purely intellectual relationship with Dorothy Wordsworth. The analysis is concluded with a general statement about the poem:

I believe that the reason of *Kubla Khan's* popularity is that it provides a fine defence for all dreamers who suffer from a feeling of inferiority to their more stalwart and hearty neighbours; and this appreciation rises in the reader's mind as the result of the same imaginative thinking that produced the poem, without the need of any long-winded translation into a more logical form.³⁵

So, in Graves's view, the poem will be most fully appreciated by those readers who share Coleridge's very particular emotional predicament. This reading is, of course, wholly in keeping with, what could be called the poetics of identification that Graves expounded in *On English Poetry*, whereby the reader recognises his or her own conflict and possibly even its solution in the latent content of the poem. In his influential study, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) which appeared in the same year as *The Meaning of Dreams*, I. A. Richards dryly alludes to Graves's analysis of Coleridge's lyric:

I do not know whether anyone but Mr Graves has attempted to analyse *Kubla Khan*, a poem which by its mode of composition and by its subject suggests itself as well fitted for analysis. The reader familiar with current methods of analysis can imagine the results of a thoroughgoing Freudian onslaught.³⁶

Richards falls firmly under that category of critic who, to borrow Graves's phraseology from *On English Poetry*, regards 'the psychology of creative art' as 'Terra Incognita'; at least in the psychoanalytic sense. Indeed, on the page preceding his reference to Graves in *Principles*, Richards argues: 'Whatever psycho-analysis may aver, the mental processes of the poet are not a very

³⁴ Ibid. p.157.

³⁵ Ibid. p.158.

³⁶ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1924, rpt 1925), p.30.

profitable field for investigation. They offer far too happy a hunting ground for uncontrollable conjecture... and [are] subject to the *gravest* dangers [emphasis mine].³⁷ Given his avowedly anti-psychoanalytic stance, it is difficult not to notice the slip of the pen that occurs at the end of this passage. It is also worth remembering that the critic who would later put Graves's 'thoroughgoing Freudian onslaught[s]' to best use was none other than Richards's own protégé, the young William Empson.

The final part of 'Dreams and Poetry' is devoted to a reading of Graves's own poem 'The Gnat', which originally appeared in the *Oxford Review* on 28 October 1920 and was reprinted the following year in *The Pier-Glass*. This lyric tells the story of an elderly shepherd named Watkin who begins to feel the presence of a gnat-like creature within his skull:

Now (truth or fantasy) the shepherd nourished
Fast in his brain, due earnings of transgression,
A creature like that to avenging fly
Once crept unseen at Duke Titus's ear,
Tunnelling gradually inwards, upwards,
Heading for flowery pastures of the brain...³⁸

Although Graves claims that 'the story about the Gnat and Titus is an old Jewish legend',³⁹ his description of the 'avenging fly' that entered 'Duke Titus's ear' could equally be read as an allusion to the 'black ill favoured fly' that sparks off Titus's lust for revenge in the third act of *Titus Andronicus*.⁴⁰ It also recalls the 'Small gnats' that 'lodge in sleeping ears' and 'rouse therein / A trumpet's din / With Day of Judgement Fears' in Graves's 1920 lyric, 'One Hard Look'.⁴¹ Those 'flowery pastures of the brain' that the creature punningly *heads* toward, meanwhile, anticipate the elusive 'acres of the mind' that Graves evokes in his 1927 poem, 'Lost Acres'.⁴² Believing the gnat to be a punishment for some past 'sin', Watkin hears an 'inner voice' proclaiming: 'The moment comes, therefore be ready!' While the speaker of the poem

³⁷ Ibid. p.29.

³⁸ *MOD*, p.159.

³⁹ Ibid. p.162.

⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Thompson Learning, 1998, rpt [with revisions] 2001), p.1141.

⁴¹ *CP1*, p.79.

⁴² *CP2*, p.6.

reveals that this ‘call’ is addressed to the ‘intruder’, Watkin assumes that he is being instructed to prepare for his own death. Fearing that his dog, Prinny, will be mistreated after his demise, the old man decides that the animal must also die. Unwilling to do the deed himself, he resolves to ask the local minister, who will act as ‘God’s hand’, but soon finds that he is unable to request the favour. The following night, Watkin awakes to excruciating pain as he feels the creature attempting to burst from his skull.

On the next night
 The busy Gnat, swollen to giant size,
 Pent-up within the skull, knew certainly,
 As a bird knows in the egg, his hour was come.
 The thrice repeated call had given him summons...
 He must out, crack the shell, out, out!
 He strains, clasps his wings, arches his back,
 Drives in his talons, out! out!⁴³

The refrain ‘out, out!’ may well be another Shakespearean reference, echoing, as it does, Macbeth’s famous exclamation: ‘Out, out, brief candle!’⁴⁴ and further reinforces Patrick Keane’s claim that ‘Graves’s *is* a poetry of allusion’.⁴⁵ In ‘The Gnat’ meanwhile Watkin, who is driven into a state of frenzy by the pain, ‘tears an axe from the wall’ and destroys much of his home, killing Prinny in the process. At the very same moment the gnat flies out through the shepherd’s mouth and, after some confusion, ‘soars out into the meadows’. The speaker reveals that Watkin survived the creature’s birth, but, now without his dog, he is a labourer rather than a shepherd. Nor, we are told, does he remember much of the trauma, as he spends his days working, zombie-like, ‘among the buried stones’.⁴⁶

According to Graves, the poem was based on a true story from St. Ives in Cambridgeshire about an elderly shepherd who came to believe that, as a result of some past misdeed, a creature was living within his head. Graves recalls that he felt a sense of ‘immense sympathy’⁴⁷ with the old man in the story and decided to give his ‘phantom’ creature form by describing it as a

⁴³ *MOD*, p.161.

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare*, p.797.

⁴⁵ Patrick J. Keane, *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1980), p.9.

⁴⁶ *MOD*, p.162.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.163.

gnat in the poem. At around the time he wrote this lyric, Graves claims that he was suffering from an acute bout of shell-shock brought on by the politically turbulent climate of post-war Europe and the fear that fighting might once again break out. Convinced that a course of psychoanalysis would cure his condition but also cause his poetic inspiration to dry-up, Graves agonized over whether or not to seek treatment: ‘The conflict of my mind was, therefore, this, which is the more important, poetic ambition or a quiet mind?’⁴⁸ Graves goes on to explain that the gnat, with its loud, mechanistic overtones, symbolises his shell-shock, while the dog stands for his poetic sensibility and the minister his potential psychiatrist. By killing the dog the old man ceased to be a shepherd and was forced to become a labourer, just as Graves believed that psychoanalysis would kill his poetry and force him to become ‘a schoolmaster or a bank-clerk’:

It would take too long to discuss all the symbolic history of this poem, but the Gnat itself has many attributes which connect it with a war-neurosis; it holds suggestions of air-raids, of the zero-hour for attack, and the crazy noise of battle. The last line of the poem probably refers to psychoanalysis; meaning that all that will be left for me when I have ceased to be a poet will be scraping among the buried and unfruitful memories of the past.⁴⁹

In stark contrast with the interpretation of ‘Kubla Khan’ that precedes it, this reading is both sensitive to the poem’s associative complexities or ‘suggestions’ and impressively equivocal in its conclusions (‘The last line of the poem *probably* refers to... [emphasis mine]’).

Graves proposes that the conflict behind ‘The Gnat’ finally ended when he came to the conclusion that undergoing psychiatric treatment would not necessarily result in either the resolution of his neurosis or the termination of his poetic creativity. The practice of psychoanalytic ‘interpretation’, he argues, ‘has no more power to end poetry than it has to stop dreaming. The dreams or the poetry will change, and that is all.’⁵⁰ This realization marks an important turning point in Graves’s thought since the argument of *On English Poetry* was still informed, to a certain extent, by his

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.164.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.165.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.165.

lingering *Pier-Glass* fear of getting ‘too completely cured’⁵¹ and becoming a ‘dull and easy writer’⁵² as a result. Indeed, in his first critical volume, Graves risks contradicting himself by espousing a theory of poetry as solution to conflict, while at the same time arguing that once ‘the conflict of the poet’s sub-personalities has been finally settled, by some satisfaction of desire or removal of a cause of fear.... the victors dictate their own laws uncontradicted, in legal prose or (from habit) in verse’.⁵³ According to this view, psychological resolution is both the primary aim of poetry and, potentially, its single greatest threat. This theoretical deadlock is, presumably, what Graves meant when he later revealed that he was ‘confused’ in *On English Poetry* about ‘the meaning of “solution to conflict”’.⁵⁴ By the time we get to *The Meaning of Dreams* and *Poetic Unreason*, however, interpretation is embraced more unequivocally as a generative rather than a destructive influence upon the poet’s work. The new importance of analysis to Graves’s thought will be explored further in the third and fourth parts of this chapter, where I closely examine two interrelated sections of *Poetic Unreason* entitled ‘Defence of Poetic Analysis’ and ‘Secondary Elaboration’. Before addressing this theme, I will trace the evolution of Graves’s conflict theory, first by looking at his reading of *Hamlet* in the book’s opening chapter and then by considering his ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ model of the poet’s mind.

II. ‘THE POET’S MULTIPLE VISION’: A JEKYLL AND HYDE THEORY OF POETRY

Graves begins *Poetic Unreason* by maintaining that he still holds to the view he expressed in his previous book, *On English Poetry*, that the poem effectively rids, or at least partially rids, the poet of some pressing emotional

⁵¹ Ibid. p.164.

⁵² *GTAT*(29), p.278.

⁵³ *OEP*, pp.36-7.

⁵⁴ *PU*, p.164.

conflict between his rival 'sub-personalities or other selves'. According to Graves, poetry performs a parallel function in relation to the reader, whose 'mental disorders' are similarly eased in proportion to their level of identification with the conflict that is dramatised in the poem. Graves's theory rests, therefore, on the idea that 'The appreciation of Poetry presupposes a common interest or group of interests between the poet and his reader'.⁵⁵ In this schema, poetry might take the form of a crystallised statement of the conflict, thereby offering clarification to the poet or reader who is confused as to the nature of his or her crisis. Alternatively, it might constitute a 'poetry of escape', providing 'temporary relief', in the manner of Graves's own *Country Sentiment* poems. Perhaps the ideal kind of therapeutic poetry, however, is that which actually posits a solution to the problem, 'suggesting', as Graves puts it, 'how a new common life can be formed between these conflicting interests by the intervention of a mediating influence'.⁵⁶

Once he has established his working definitions of poetry, Graves moves on to discuss the relationship between poet and poem in greater detail. Not only is the poet, in this account, unable to forecast the content of his poem before it is written, he is also frequently incapable of explaining the imagery used in his own first draft:

he may even find it impossible to trace even in outline the history of every emblem that occurs in the poem, and any explanation of the poem in terms of the logical reasoning that demands a single recognizable character for every statement made in the poem will be inadequate in face of the associative complexities and absurdities that the multiple vision of the poet produces: these in defiance of the unities of time, space, and spatio-temporal probability.⁵⁷

Because the poet's mind is simultaneously operating on a number of different 'planes' during the act of composition ('the plane of imagery, the intellectual plane, the musical plane of rhythm structure and texture'),⁵⁸ the resulting poem will be a tissue of 'associative complexities and absurdities' irreducible to any one commonsense reading. Put simply, the poet's 'multiple vision' gives rise to a multiplicity of poetic meanings that exist independently of conventional logic.

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp.2-3.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.2.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.5.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p.1.

The use of scientific terminology like ‘spatio-temporal probability’, along with fleeting references to ‘Herr Einstein’ and ‘Relativity’⁵⁹ elsewhere in the same chapter, suggest that Graves was familiar, either directly or indirectly, with Einstein’s recently published *Popular Exposition* (1920) and the challenges it posed to traditional Newtonian physics. As far as literary criticism is concerned, Graves’s model implicitly undermines the very notion of exhaustive interpretation, while, at the same time, throwing open the doors to a plethora of exciting hermeneutic possibilities.

Graves sets about demonstrating the essentially pluralistic nature of poetic composition by embarking on a lengthy discussion about *Hamlet*’s ‘failure to conform’ to Aristotle’s dramatic unities; a discussion that is necessarily conducted under the shadow of T. S. Eliot’s ‘*Hamlet*’ essay, which appeared in *The Sacred Wood* under the title ‘Hamlet and his Problems’ just a few years earlier. He begins by citing a volume entitled *Hamlet and the Scottish Succession* (1921), in which Lilian Winstanley proposes that the character of Hamlet was actually based on a combination of King James I and Essex, inheriting, among other things, the ‘irresolution’ of the former and the ‘rashness’ of the latter.⁶⁰ According to Graves, Winstanley provides three possible explanations for her theory. The first stipulates that Shakespeare ‘unconsciously’ drew on these real historical figures in the creation of his central character. The second hypothetical reason hinges on the possibility that he wittingly used ‘a certain amount of contemporary history’ in the construction of the drama; while the third is predicated on the idea that the play is mostly based on this material, which Shakespeare was intent upon mythologizing. Winstanley is dismissive of the first possibility, since the close historical parallels make it almost impossible to conceive that these events of massive public interest were ‘accidentally’ woven into the fabric of the story. Graves, however, adds to this list a fourth possibility, which posits that Shakespeare did indeed take these events in unconsciously, while maintaining that there was nothing accidental about the process. On the contrary, Graves suggests that the highly public political events of the ‘Essex Conspiracy and

⁵⁹ Ibid. pp.3-4.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p.6.

the Scottish Succession' had a deep emotional resonance for Shakespeare because they 'allegorize[d] a personal conflict for him'.

This conflict revolved around a number of factors in the playwright's life, not least the links that existed between his company and the Essex Conspiracy; links that threatened professional and financial ruin and the death of his patron, Southampton. On top of this Graves cites the crisis of Shakespeare's love-life, which was coming to a head at around the time of *Hamlet's* composition. The various sides of this conflict and others were, he suggests, uncannily mirrored in the figures of Essex and James:

Shakespeare as a lover was, as I read the story, paralysed by the disharmony of his rival selves, typified on the one hand by the magnanimity, generosity, passionateness, recklessness and courtier-like qualities of Essex, and on the other by the scholarly, retired, mean, timorous nature of James. Shakespeare's social and economic misfortune is directly due to the failure of the contrary temperaments of James and Essex to concert together for a common political end. So *Hamlet* is smothered and battered by the undertow of these varying characteristics.⁶¹

Not only, then, did Shakespeare write *Hamlet* (or re-write *Hamlet*, since Graves, like Eliot, claims that the play was a revision of a drama by Thomas Kyd based on an old Amleth saga) for practical reasons pertaining to the survival of his company; he also wrote it with the unconscious intention of clarifying, in fictional terms, the intense emotional conflicts that were plaguing him at this time. The act of composition, in other words, allowed him to become more aware of the nature of his own crisis 'on the various planes of love, politics, metaphysics and so on'.⁶² While Graves concedes that a certain amount of 'secondary revision' would have been necessary in order to make these factors 'intelligible', 'the main structure was determined by the fantastic interaction of impulses over which as a rational individual he had no control'.⁶³ In this light, Hamlet's contradictory nature is the product of a swarm of unconscious and conflicting 'impulses' rather than a single, deliberate authorial intention; a distinct case of multiple, rather than

⁶¹ Ibid. pp.8-9.

⁶² Ibid. p.9.

⁶³ Ibid. p.9.

monocular, poetic vision. This kind of imaginative, psychological approach to the play is precisely what Eliot rebukes in his famous essay of 1919:

Hamlet the character has had an especial temptation for that most dangerous type of critic: the critic with a mind that is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead. These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge...⁶⁴

No doubt Eliot would have added with some justification that Graves, in this reading, made of Hamlet a Graves.

Getting down to specifics, Graves explores the significance of the play's famous grave-digging scene (a scene tailor-made, it seems, for the eponymous author). Challenging the conventional reading of this scene as a piece of comic light-relief, he attributes to it instead a seriousness equal to the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy and the mad scene in *King Lear*. According to Graves, the grave-digger's song ('In youth when I did love, did love, / Methought it was very sweet...') re-writes Lord Vaux's 'well known ballad' ('I loathe that I did love / In youth that I thought sweet.') because Shakespeare was not yet able to face up to the painful fact that his 'friend' of the Sonnets had betrayed him. This tallies, to a certain extent, with Eliot's observation that '*Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art.'⁶⁵ However, unlike Eliot, Graves is happiest, it seems, when reading in just this kind of half-light; the shadows allowing him to speculate with greater freedom. The mysterious dead Yorick, for example, is, in Graves's view, a composite of the playwright's own dead self ('the jaunty author of the recent brilliant comedies'),⁶⁶ the jester-like Essex, whose body had suffered similar insults during his bungled execution, and Tarleton, a recently deceased comedian from Shakespeare's company. Again Graves argues that this kind of dream-like running-together of disparate but interrelated factors is as unlikely to be the result of pure accident as it is to be the product of conscious design.

⁶⁴ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.141.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.144.

⁶⁶ *PU*, p.10.

At this point Graves appears to make a further digression, as he recounts an apparently unrelated autobiographical anecdote about his recent experience sitting for a sculptor. Shortly before his session, Graves and the artist discussed two mutual friends, unfortunately referred to as the 'Oriental' and the 'Occidental,' who, though remarkably similar on a number of points (in terms of career, temperament, and so forth), had never actually met. Once the sculpture was complete, both men noticed that 'though it was in general structure a head of Robert Graves,'⁶⁷ a number of the features bore a striking resemblance to those of the two mutual friends previously under discussion. Furthermore, while each friend, when shown the sculpture, saw within it their own likeness, Graves's four-year-old daughter discerned a semblance of the sculptor himself. Graves, meanwhile, was delighted with the strange result as it provided him with a useful, if convoluted, example of the poetic phenomenon that he detected at the heart of *Hamlet's* composition. By way of illustration, he superimposes his earlier reading of the play onto the story of his sculpture-portrait:

It was no more a mere abstract study for a statue without personal associations, than Hamlet can be regarded as a mere dramatic character with no reference to Shakespeare's personal history. It was no more a portrait of me than Hamlet is a portrait of the old Danish Amelth of the saga. It was no more a portrait of the Oriental or the Occidental than Hamlet is a portrait merely of James or merely of Essex. It was no more a portrait of the sculptor's own actual features than Hamlet is a portrait of the actor-manager and (possible) political agent for the Southampton faction.⁶⁸

The drama and the sculpture are, of course, all of these things and none of them at one and the same time. Despite Graves's seemingly exhaustive (and occasionally exhausting) approach to the possible sources behind both of these 'texts', we are left, in each case, with a deliberately partial account.

While he opened his first chapter with a reaffirmation of *On English Poetry's* central argument, Graves begins his second, 'A Theory of Consciousness', by expressing his dissatisfaction with certain other positions that he held in that book. In particular, he challenges the clear distinction that he (implicitly)

⁶⁷ Ibid. p.14.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.15.

made between ‘deliberate’ and ‘unwitting’ thoughts and actions; a differentiation that led him to distinguish between two analogous types of poetry (which he elsewhere refers to as Classical and Romantic): ‘I distinguished between, say, a *deliberate* poetic allegory in the established tradition and an *unwitting* uprush of inspired poetry when in a state of actual dream’.⁶⁹ Although Graves is quick to emphasise that this distinction is by no means without ‘meaning’, he makes it clear that it can no longer, in his view, be employed to classify all forms of ‘mental activity’: ‘I now hold that consciousness and un- or non-consciousness can be distinguished, but in a wider sense than merely as the *unwitting* and *deliberate*; that the nature of non-consciousness is that we can never have any knowledge of its character as we may eventually have knowledge of the *unwitting*.’⁷⁰ The crucial distinction to be made here, then, is between the ‘unwitting’ and the ‘un- or non-conscious’ aspects of thought and experience; a distinction originally made by Rivers in *Instinct and the Unconscious*.⁷¹ Whereas the former, according to Graves, can be brought into consciousness (rather like Freud’s notion of the ‘pre-conscious’, as outlined in his *Introductory Lectures* of 1916-17)⁷² and understood, albeit only in retrospect, the latter remains forever outside the scope of intellectual vision. Though it doesn’t quite constitute Freud’s ‘cauldron of seething excitement,’⁷³ Graves’s version of the unconscious is responsible for the mysteriously disjunctive, non-linear nature of much conscious thought:

...consciousness is not an even flow like a looking-glass vista; to me the only way of accounting for these discrepancies is the intervention of a continuously interrupting and continuously interrupted sequence of non-conscious activity, of which knowledge can never, as I have suggested, appear, but which must be postulated if the logical concatenation of cause and effect is to be maintained.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid. p.49.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.49-50.

⁷¹ Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious*, p.16.

⁷² Sigmund Freud, ‘Lecture 19: Resistance and Repression’, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. James Strachey and Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1973, rpt 1991), p.337.

⁷³ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Analysis of the Psychological Personality’, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Helena Ragg-Kirkby, ed. Malcolm Bowie (London: Penguin, 2003), p.67.

⁷⁴ *PU*. p.50.

There is something typically Gravesian about the irony of maintaining ‘the logical concatenation of cause and effect’ by postulating an idea as inherently *illogical* as the unconscious. The opening of this passage recalls Virginia Woolf’s famous observation in ‘Modern Fiction’ (1919) that ‘Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged’⁷⁵ and serves to remind us that Graves was working along the same kind of (crooked) lines as his modernist contemporaries, even if those lines did eventually lead to strikingly different ends. The use of ‘looking-glass’ in the place of ‘gig lamps’ inevitably brings to mind the figure of Alice and the 1924 lyric that Graves wrote about her adventures on the other side of the mirror. In this case, however, the looking-glass is more conventional, providing a source of continuity and correspondence rather than a ‘lubberland of dream and laughter’.⁷⁶ Graves’s account of the unconscious as a ‘continuously interrupting and continuously interrupted’ force also reminds the reader of his enigmatic 1930 poem ‘Interruption’ in which an unidentified presence (described only in terms of ‘boots’ and ‘feet’) tramples through a ‘picture-postcard’ country scene ‘like a dark tunnel’ before disappearing without a trace.⁷⁷ Similarly, in Graves’s formulation, the unconscious interrupts the conscious mind only to be interrupted itself by the conscious mind’s awareness of its interruptive presence, resulting in a kind of never-ending game of hide-and-seek. As a victim of prolonged shellshock, Graves himself was forced to play this ‘game’ at an unusually intense level in the years following the War.

But the interruptions of the unconscious are not always so dramatic. Indeed, Graves recognises that more often than not they go undetected, masquerading as thoroughly conscious actions and thoughts, thereby creating the illusion of self-possession: ‘Action does not directly proceed from thought, nor knowledge from action, nor thought from knowledge, but these phases of consciousness are each derived from moments of non-conscious activity, a sort of invisible property-shifting between each phase.’⁷⁸ Given its indescribable nature, there is almost always something ghostly about

⁷⁵ Virginia Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’, *20th Century Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1972, rpt 1971), p.88.

⁷⁶ *CP1*, p.249.

⁷⁷ *CP2*, p.36.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p.50.

descriptions of the unconscious and, in this respect, Graves's account is no exception. His unconscious is, after all, 'a sort of invisible property' that slips between conscious thoughts imperceptibly altering their course. If the unconscious is the invisible cause in this equation then the 'unwitting' is the visible effect; although it only becomes visible once it has entered the unreliable sphere of the past: 'Between the "deliberate" and the "unwitting" there is, so far as I can see, only this distinction, that the "deliberate" is in the present tense, the "unwitting" in the past.'⁷⁹ In other words, we can only ever *remember* experience that is unwitting, we can never be fully aware of it as it happens. Even then, Graves argues, it cannot be reproduced exactly, either in the subject's mind or in his or her actions, since the act of remembering is necessarily transformative. He maintains that this can be observed at the level of poetic composition: 'a poem will never be a copy of the poet's past life. It will be a new experience, but it will be continuous with his past life in the sense that but for this, it could never have come into existence.'⁸⁰ Of course, the 'new experience' engendered by the poem is not simply a product of the poet's unreliable memory; it is also the result of a negotiation with the 'cool web of language'⁸¹ from which no experience can emerge wholly unaltered. Given their antagonistic natures, the 'unwitting' and the 'deliberate' are, in Graves's view, unable to co-exist at any one time. Therefore, the appearance of one indicates the temporary defeat of the other. Graves draws on the twin protagonists of Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* to illustrate this point: 'Between Jekyll and Hyde there is necessarily conflict: their actions are mutually hostile... Hyde and Jekyll coexist in the individual as possibilities, but in relation to any given situation only one will appear at a time when the conflict continues.'⁸² Although we are already fifty or so pages into *Poetic Unreason*, Graves goes on to use this trope to deliver a belated statement of intent in relation to his study: 'This book will principally show Poetry as a record of the conflicts between various pairs of Jekyll and Hyde, or as a record of the solution of these conflicts.'⁸³ According to Graves, a poem may represent the

⁷⁹ Ibid. p.51.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p.51.

⁸¹ *CPI*, p.323.

⁸² Ibid. pp.51-2.

⁸³ Ibid. p.52.

record of a conflict by being either a ‘partisan statement’ of one side or the other, or by being a ‘double statement of both sides’: ‘one side appearing in the manifest statement, that is, in the intellectual mode, the other in the latent content, that is, in the emotional mode, with neither side intelligible to the other’.⁸⁴ Returning to his Jekyll and Hyde analogy, Graves attempts to clarify his terms by reminding the reader that they have social as well as psychological implications:

The terms Jekyll and Hyde, by the way, are rather more than synonyms for “deliberate” and “unwitting” because Jekyll is always used in the restricted sense of action in conformity with the dominant social code of the community, while Hyde is the outlaw. When Jekyll appears, Hyde is the “unwitting,” but it must not be forgotten that Jekyll is the “unwitting” when Hyde appears.⁸⁵

As we shall see, Graves is deeply suspicious of ‘the dominant social code’ when it comes to matters of aesthetic taste and canonisation, betraying at the same time a personal bias toward the literary ‘outlaw’. By drawing attention to the fact that ‘Jekyll is the “unwitting” when Hyde appears’ Graves appears to be challenging the idea that each side of the conflict is a constant, suggesting instead that the transition from deliberate to unwitting and vice versa necessarily involves a degree of psychological role-swapping. In other words, when Hyde appears Jekyll does not continue, in his absence, to represent the deliberate or conscious principle in the equation. Instead he takes on the role of Hyde’s unconscious, a switch that contradicts the conventional notion that one of the pair is pure id and the other pure superego. As Graves puts it: ‘If the privileges of Mr. Hyde can be best secured by a technique of a very subtle intellectual character which might be considered proper to Dr. Jekyll, this technique will be employed.’⁸⁶ What is at stake here is Graves’s conviction that, contrary to popular opinion, ‘unwitting’ or unconscious thought, far from being simply the source of our most ‘primitive reactions to love or danger’, is actually just as intellectually viable and practically useful as its ‘deliberate’ or conscious equivalent.

⁸⁴ Ibid. pp.52-3.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p.53.

⁸⁶ Ibid. p.53.

Graves moves on to discuss in some detail the process that takes place when ‘there is a disagreement between [the] manifest statement and [the] latent content’ in a poem. According to Graves, the poet, when faced with some difficult problem or conflict, makes a conscious decision as to which side he will take. This decision is made on the ‘intellectual’ or deliberate plane and therefore dominates the poet’s conscious mind. The other option, though it appears to be the road not taken, is in fact embraced on the ‘emotional’ level and driven underground into the unconscious, where it occupies the poet’s dream-life. In Graves’s view, the poem comes into being when the suppressed emotional side of the conflict wells-up and launches a sudden attack on the dominant intellectual side, resulting in ‘an outburst of symbolism against the victor’.⁸⁷ As a result, the first-draft of the poem constitutes a symbolic narrative that the poet’s waking or conscious mind is unlikely to understand. Therefore

the victor either interprets the symbolism in a sense pleasing to himself or views the poem as impersonal and inspired and has at any rate no conflict with it. Less or more work is done to elaborate the first draft of the poem in proportion as the victor on the intellectual level finds the manifest statement compatible with his own interests: when we say that a certain poet always spoils his poems when he thinks he is improving them, we mean that we are in greater sympathy with the party of the conflict which was active on the emotional level...⁸⁸

So, just as the emotional side was relegated to the unconscious in the original instance of the conflict, it is once again suppressed by the dominant intellectual side in the re-writing of the poem, whereby it is forced into the ‘latent content’. Here it survives as a ghostly presence, haunting the surface, or ‘prose’, meaning of the verse, much as it might have haunted the dreams of the poet in the period leading up to composition. If, to the reader’s mind, this presence is too faint, as Graves argues it is in Wordsworth’s late revisions, then the act of revision becomes nothing more than an act of poetic ‘vandalism’ (a charge that many levelled at the alterations Graves himself made to his later volumes of *Collected Poems*).

⁸⁷ Ibid. p.54.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p.54.

In chapter three, entitled simply 'Jekyll and Hyde', Graves considers the persistence of his Jekyll and Hyde poetic model ('that is poetry where the manifest content and the latent content represent opposite sides of a conflict')⁸⁹ in devotional or 'so-called "religious"' verse. In particular, he concentrates on George Herbert's poem 'The Bag', which is quoted in full. Graves reveals that he is familiar with the details of Herbert's life and, more importantly, that he feels a profound sympathy 'with the poem in all its aspects'.⁹⁰ As we have already observed, such emotional 'contact' is, in Graves's view, absolutely fundamental to any exercise in poetic analysis. With this in mind, he goes on to explain his own unconventional methodology in relation to his interpretation of 'The Bag', warning the sober-minded reader that he or she may find it to be a bridge (or an abridgement) too far: 'I have attempted the analysis in the form of a story of what I am convinced occurred, filling in the bare outline with lively trifles of my own invention. I put it here early in the book to save my readers time and trouble: if they do not shut up *Poetic Unreason* at this point, they will have no occasion to do so at any later provocation'.⁹¹ In other words, Graves has imagined a scenario, based on his biographical reading, that he believes took place and gave rise to Herbert's poem. There is a curious mixture of conviction ('what I am convinced occurred') and whimsy ('lively trifles of my own invention') in this statement, suggesting that this reading will be staged by Graves the poet as much as by Graves the analyst. While he appears to be fully aware that this imaginative or poetic approach to literary interpretation might not sit well with a number of his readers, at around sixty pages in, his warning to them hardly comes at an 'early' stage in the book. This technique of creatively 'filling in the bare outline' of historical 'facts' is, it seems, very much a product of 'the emotional mode of thought' that Graves alluded to in the previous chapter; a mode of thought that would become increasingly central to both his mythographic writing and his historical fiction. (Indeed it is worth remembering that, shortly after completing work on the manuscript of *Poetic Unreason*, he began work on his first novel, the Biblical romance *My Head! My Head!* which was also

⁸⁹ Ibid. p.57.

⁹⁰ Ibid. p.58.

⁹¹ Ibid. pp.58-9.

published in 1925.) However, before he actually tells the story behind ‘The Bag’, Graves demonstrates its Jekyll and Hyde status by dividing the poem into two conflicting parts: ‘The first stanza of the piece and the two next lines is a chapter of the Jekyll life of Herbert the saint, the remainder of the piece is a chapter of the Hyde life of Herbert the sinner. Neither of these conflicting lives has any respect for the rights of the other.’⁹² So, from the moment the poem’s speaker begins to tell his ‘strange storie’ on line three of the second stanza, we are in the company of the poet’s (previously) defeated, unconscious self. After establishing this dynamic, Graves ends his little preamble by wryly pointing out that the ‘story’ he is proposing has been ‘omitted in *most* editions of Walton’s *Lives* [emphasis mine]’.⁹³

The narrative revolves around a discussion about temptation that Graves imagines to have taken place between Herbert and the newly ‘reformed’ John Donne at Westminster. Warily checking for eavesdroppers, Donne tells his friend about a strange experience he had during Passion Week while staying at a tavern, which he describes as ‘a lodging rather for pedlars and chapmen than for priests and men of substance’.⁹⁴ This remark prompts Herbert to remind his interlocutor that Christ himself was born in the stable of a similarly ‘low’ establishment. Continuing with his tale, Donne recounts how, during his first night at the tavern, he was insulted and mocked by a number of drunken patrons for his status as a man of the cloth; an experience that drove him to take refuge in his room. Once again Herbert adds that Christ suffered comparable humiliation at the hands of his tormentors. According to Donne, he was visited in his quarters by ‘a blue mantled wench’ who promptly disrobed and entreated him to ‘lie with her’.⁹⁵ He then goes on to describe her sympathetic reaction to the ill-treatment he received earlier in the evening from the drinkers in the tavern common room: “Ay, and they used you shamefully... making as if to stab you with their pikes. Me too they insulted... See where I was wounded in the thigh but half-an-hour ago. I went to the vinteur for more wine, and as I returned a soldier ran upon me with a pike.

⁹² Ibid. p.59.

⁹³ Ibid. p.59.

⁹⁴ Ibid. p.59.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p.60.

See!”⁹⁶ At this point Herbert interrupts again, although this time it is a ‘nervous’, rather than a pious, interjection as he puts it to his friend “You say that she was comely”. Confirming this, Donne claims that, though his resolve was sorely tested, he managed to remind his guest (and himself) that ‘this spring night is the night whereon our Blessed Saviour died’.⁹⁷ On hearing this, the nameless woman tearfully explained that her work at the inn earned her no wage, except for a small amount of food and drink, and, as a result, she had ‘given up her life to giving men merry nights’ in order to earn ‘a piece of gold or a change of clothes’.⁹⁸

Meanwhile Herbert, once again in pious mode, shakes his head disapprovingly at ‘a life very evilly spent’, adding: ‘Our blessed Lord gave up his life that men should sin no more, but sleep in peace.’⁹⁹ Donne maintains that he said these very words to his less-than-coy-mistress, who eventually agreed to go, but only after leaving the offer (and her door) open to both him and any of his friends who should find themselves ‘inclined amorously’ while staying in Oxford. Somewhat suspiciously, Herbert demands to be told the name of ‘this wicked inn’ where innocent girls are paid nothing and driven to prostitution. Donne replies: ‘Penny-Farthing Street, the Bag and Staff’,¹⁰⁰ before asking his friend why he wishes to know. Herbert defends his curiosity by arguing that such an ordeal, while terrifying, would leave him in little doubt about the quality of his own faith (though, it is not entirely clear whether he envies Donne this experience for its capacity to purify the soul or for its sheer eroticism):

“O master Donne, if I were sure that I could sleep soundly as you slept with that open door hard by and not yield to my gross flesh, I would count myself worthy indeed. And she was comely? How comely? Very comely indeed? Good Donne, I praise you! You spent the remainder of the night in prayer? Oh I would welcome so evil a temptation were my faith in God’s mercy but sure enough to keep me from shipwreck. But if she came to me, should I close my eyes and not look upon her? Or would this be worse, a fleeing from temptation rather than a struggle breast to breast? Well might I close my eyes but not my heart!”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Ibid. p.60.

⁹⁷ Ibid. p.60.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p.61.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p.61.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p.61.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. pp.61-2.

Graves seems to be flirting with outright comedy by giving Herbert this rather breathless monologue, with its relentless string of questions about the girl's 'comeliness', not to mention the barely disguised innuendo of 'breast to breast'. His Chaucerian tale concludes with the revelation that, ten weeks after this discussion, Herbert visited Oxford, but chose to stay with the Dean of Christchurch. According to Graves, it was during this visit that he wrote 'The Bag'.

In Graves's view, the 'God of power' described in Herbert's poem combines aspects of a Christ-like 'divine figure' and the woman from what he believes, or imagines, to have been Donne's account. Furthermore, he holds that, by the end of 'The Bag,' the 'temptress' has become the more dominant presence of the two, demonstrating a number of 'distinct[ly] feminine characteristics' that seem to be at odds with the predominantly masculine description of the central figure in the first half of the poem.¹⁰² Graves proceeds to argue that this kind of 'double figure' is commonplace in much 'Primitive' and 'sacred' art, before citing the 'Essex-James I combination in *Hamlet*, and the Fanny Brawne-Consumption combination in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*' that he identified earlier on, as 'more sophisticated' examples of this phenomenon.¹⁰³ By way of comparison, Graves moves on to examine Robert Burns's famous ballad 'John Barleycorn', a poem that appears to be nothing more than a simple revision of an old drinking song with a fairly straightforward allegorical meaning. Challenging the general complacency that surrounds this lyric, in much the same way that he challenged received opinions about 'Kubla Khan' and the grave-digger scene in *Hamlet*, Graves questions Burns's motives for re-writing the original material in the way that he does, arguing that most readers 'do not discuss *why* the song should have been re-written as it stands'.¹⁰⁴ He also draws attention to the fact that, in a number of places, the poem does not stand up to the kind of neat allegorical reading that would suggest its true subject is 'the planting and reaping of barely and its distillation and eventual appearance in the tavern as whiskey'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid. p.62.

¹⁰³ Ibid. pp.62-3.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p.63.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.63.

Graves posits that this occasional divergence from, what appears to be, the poem's central metaphor is a sure sign that there is another, more problematic meaning at work: 'Whenever allegorical symbolism goes a little queer in this way it is wise to suspect a second allegory working beneath'; adding 'here it is Jekyll who is recessive and Hyde who is dominant'.¹⁰⁶ So when our expectations are momentarily confounded in this way, we can take it that Hyde is breaking through the surface of the poem, interrupting the even flow of its prose-meaning rather like a crossed-line in a phone conversation or the sudden appearance of an incorrect frame on a movie reel.

Much as he detected the presence of the temptress from Donne's story behind the divine figure in Herbert's 'The Bag', Graves locates 'the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ' behind the strange tale of 'John Barlycorn', though he is quick to concede that the order of these events in the poem is comparable to the 'haphazard order... one is accustomed to find in allegorical dreams'.¹⁰⁷ He argues that the poem begins with 'the Magi and the massacre of the Innocents' and concludes with 'the Blessed Sacrament that will make the widow's heart sing though the tear were in her eye', before identifying allusions to 'the Scourging', 'the Crown of Thorns', 'the Crucifixion', 'the Passion on the cross', 'the Spear-thrust', 'the Burial' and 'the Resurrection'.¹⁰⁸ Graves then sets about addressing a number of the more obvious objections that might be made to this reading. The first of these deals with the fact that, unlike the three kings of the poem, 'the Magi did not swear a solemn oath that Jesus Christ should die'.¹⁰⁹ Although Graves claims that he will tackle this point in greater detail at a later stage of his thesis (in a discussion of 'the illogical working of associative thought'), he does venture that the poem's opening is actually an elliptical account of the Magi's meeting with Herod, their message to him about the birth of Christ and *his* oath that the child should die. Graves goes on to point out that a second possible objection to his interpretation might lie in the apparent inapplicability of several details in the poem to the story of Christ (for example, 'He faded into age' and 'Darksome pit with water to the brim'). In Graves's view, however, the Christ

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p.63.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p.64.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. pp.64-5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.66.

story element of the poem represents the unconscious or latent content, which, Hyde-like, bubbles to the surface intermittently, complicating what is an ostensibly simple allegory about the harvest cycle. As a result, we should not expect to find an exact, blow-by-blow parallel between the stories of Christ and Barleycorn in Burns's lyric; they are, after all, in a state of conflict rather than cooperation.

For all his justifications and explanations, Graves imagines that many of his readers might still think to themselves: "It may be so, though we do not feel very happy about the haphazard order of events, but tell us why on earth should this undercurrent of allusion occur in a drinking song".¹¹⁰ By way of response to this last, hypothetical objection, Graves turns his attention to the details of Robert Burns's life, focusing in particular on the division that apparently existed between what he calls the 'good angel' of the poet's 'pious upbringing' and the 'bad angel' of 'the whiskey bottle goading him to degradation'.¹¹¹ According to Graves, the effect of this conflict upon Burns's life can be considered from two alternative perspectives: '[it] can be equally regarded as one of good intention continually oppressed by the evil angel but always reappearing for a further struggle against the odds, or as a life of debauch hampered by the continual reproach of the Figure on the Cross'.¹¹² Depending on our point of view, then, Burns represents either a particularly heroic example of the tortured soul *or* an unexceptional drunkard who suffers from the occasional hangover of Puritan guilt. For Graves, these two versions of the poet are successfully fused in the associational logic of 'John Barleycorn':

These two views are stereoscopically presented as one in the ballad, the mental connecting link being probably the associations of Jesus Christ with the Good Vine, Whose blood is drunk in the Sacrament; the national drink of the South-East is Wine; the national drink of the North-West, Whiskey. A further link between the Vine and the Seed of Corn is made by the parable of the Sower and his seed which, in spite of the thorns, the stones and the fowls of the air, contrived to grow up "thick and strong." St. Paul uses this sowing of seed as a parable of

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.66.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p.67.

¹¹² Ibid. p.67

resurrection in the passage which the Burial Service has made familiar.¹¹³

So the implicit connections between seeds, grapes, alcohol, and the figure of Christ, led Burns to revise the old song with the conscious intention of producing a straightforward harvest allegory in celebration of drink and the unconscious intention of exorcising his troubled Christian conscience. Graves's use of the photographic term 'stereoscopic' to describe this process of superimposition provides another reminder of the author's interest in science and technology as potential counterweights to the rarefied aestheticism of much critical writing (and, presumably, to the rather loose imaginative bent of his own interpretations).

Graves maintains that Burns claimed to have written his ballad with the first three verses of the original drinking song in mind and to have added "some scraps... interwoven here and there"¹¹⁴ from Laing's *Early Metrical Tales* (1826). In an attempt to assuage the objection that has vexed his analysis from the beginning, Graves goes on to argue that this quasi-collage approach to the composition of 'John Barleycorn' further explains the 'haphazard order of events in the Gospel allegory'¹¹⁵ part of the poem. (Of course, since there are no footnotes or sources to provide evidence for this thesis, it is difficult to know to what extent this is yet another of example of Graves's curiously fictional approach to the vicissitudes of historical 'fact'.) By way of illustration, he quotes three stanzas that are presented as the opening verses of the song that Burns apparently alluded to in his account of 'Barleycorn's' genesis:

There came three merry men from the East,
 And three merry men were they,
 And they did swear a solemn oath
 That Sir John Barleycorn they would slay.

They took a plough and plough'd him down,
 And laid clods upon his head;
 And then they swore a solemn oath,
 That Sir John Barleycorn was dead.

¹¹³ Ibid. p.67.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p.67.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p.67.

But the spring-time it came on amain,
 And rain towards the earth did fall;
 John Barleycorn sprung up again,
 And so subdued them all.¹¹⁶

In order to emphasise his Christ-allegory theory, Graves draws attention to the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, Burns replaced ‘three merry men’ with ‘three kings’ and the ‘subdued’ of the last line with ‘surprised’.¹¹⁷ He also refers to Allen Upward’s *Golden Bough*-inspired argument that the poem represents a reversion to ‘old racial memories of human sacrifice’, with the addendum: “‘It is most improbable that Burns had the Gospels in mind when he wrote or transcribed these verses, therefore the numerous coincidences must be historical and cosmical’”.¹¹⁸ While Graves admits that, unlike the final poem, the original song can be viewed as a ‘nursery-game form, of an ancient tradition of blood sacrifice’ he holds fast to his conviction that ‘The conflict theory accounts for the unwitting interleaving of religion with praise of drink’.¹¹⁹

Moving on from his reading of ‘John Barleycorn’, Graves tells of how he was recently ‘challenged’¹²⁰ to test his Jekyll and Hyde theory against the religious poetry of Francis Thompson. Citing Thompson’s sequence of poems, ‘Love in Dian’s Lap’, Graves suggests that the poet’s allusions to ‘the Blessed Virgin’, in addition to signifying the mother of Christ, often refer to ‘the girl who befriended [Thompson] when he was wandering and outcast’ (and who also happened to be ‘the mother of the children for whom *Sister Songs* were written’).¹²¹ When asked about Thompson’s most famous poem, ‘The Hound of Heaven’, Graves returned to the text and proclaimed to find it shot-through with images from ‘Love in Dian’s Lap’. For example, he argues that the figure of Dian is traditionally depicted with ‘hound and hunting spear’, both of which feature prominently in the lyric under discussion. Graves proceeds to maintain that there are four phases of experience in the poem: ‘two childish and two a grown man’s, all reconciled in terms of each other because of a close

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.68.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p.68.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.68.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p.68.

¹²⁰ Ibid. p.70.

¹²¹ Ibid. pp.70-1.

similarity of emotional disturbance'.¹²² The most manifest of these phases is, according to Graves, the final one, which deals with Thompson's ambivalent relationship with Christ, from whom he has fled in the past, but now embraces as the ultimate solution to his troubles. One of what Graves calls the 'childish' phases is identified as an 'escape from [a] parental authority' that turns out to be benevolent; while the other is described in terms of the child's attempt to escape from a strange dog that proves, in the end, to be a similarly non-threatening presence. According to Graves, 'the remaining phase is the one that occupies most space in the poem' and it concerns the poet's unhappy love for the married woman (referred to here as 'Dian') who, along with her husband, befriended him when he was at his most desperate.

The speaker, Graves argues, goes through periods of denial, distraction and self-loathing, just as he does throughout his battle with Christianity: 'He tried to cultivate a love for Nature, that intimate pantheism which Clare and Wordsworth enjoyed' and even attempted to 'transfer his love for the mother into affection for her children', only to find himself unable to shake his obsession.¹²³ Ultimately, the poet comes to the conclusion that the only way he can love Dian is by embracing the 'passionless' Christian love that she is prepared to offer him: 'What has been fearful to him is now beautiful, love purged of its passion. He returns to her a lover still, but, he thinks, a spiritual lover.'¹²⁴ This decision, Graves argues, enabled Thompson to simultaneously resolve both of his conflicts, religious and romantic, thereby freeing him, at least momentarily, from torment. When asked by his anonymous challenger about Thompson's other poem, 'The Dead Cardinal', Graves proposes a similar scenario in which the poet seeks advice from the eponymous priest on how he might satisfy his desire for carnal love (again represented by Dian) before death's immanent arrival and his disappointed dream of becoming a great poet, without forfeiting his place in heaven. In summary, Graves writes: 'Both the *Hound of Heaven* and the *Dead Cardinal* are certainly religious poems in the sense that Thompson's attitude to God appears in the manifest content, but they can both be equally called Love Poems and the *Hound of*

¹²² Ibid. p.71.

¹²³ Ibid. pp.72-3.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p.74.

Heaven is in the pursuit context, a Fear Poem.’¹²⁵ Indeed, it is worth remembering that religious devotion, romantic love and poetic ambition will similarly intersect in Graves’s own career with the arrival of the White Goddess, some twenty years later.

III. ‘A DUEL OF MINING AND COUNTERMINING’: THE POET AS ANALYST

In the chapter entitled ‘Defence of Poetic Analysis’ Graves describes the ‘considerable opposition’ he has faced from ‘friends who are poets by profession’ as a result of his increasingly analytical approach to the reading and writing of verse. Since neither Siegfried Sassoon nor Edward Marsh greatly approved of Graves’s critical leanings, we can take it that they were among the dissenting voices. According to Graves, their hostility towards his penchant for psychological and literary interpretation was

not only based on the fear that I or my collaborators may uncover by these means their secret sorrows or repressed vices: nor are they afraid only on my behalf... that by digging too deep into the flower-bed of my mind I may turn up soil that will kill the flowers already planted; they are equally afraid on their own account that if they acquire this habit from me their occupation will be gone, their poetry will be killed.¹²⁶

Graves’s allusion to ‘the flower-bed of my mind’ recalls his reference in ‘The Gnat’ to ‘flowery pastures of the brain’. The ‘collaborators’ mentioned at the beginning of this passage are most likely Rivers and Basanta Mallik; both of whom encouraged the young poet to cultivate his naturally analytical mindset. Among Graves’s largely Georgian poet-friends, however, this kind of intellectual self-consciousness was deemed to be fundamentally at odds with the inherently *unselfconscious* spirit of poetry. In many respects, the resistance towards all things analytical within Graves’s circle was almost certainly a late

¹²⁵ Ibid. p.76.

¹²⁶ Ibid. p.78.

manifestation of what Lawrence Lipking has identified as the Victorian ‘separation of creative activity from disinterested enquiry’.¹²⁷ Like many of their most famous nineteenth-century predecessors, the Georgian poets were generally sceptical about the possibility of maintaining a lyrical sensibility alongside a predisposition for analysis. It comes as no surprise, then, that many of Graves’s more traditional poet-contemporaries were fearful that his taste for literary dissection might be somehow contagious; as though exposure to the act of interpretation might transform them into unwilling critics and bring about their poetic demise. Indeed, it is worth remembering that, given his own initial aversion to psychoanalytic treatment and the risks that it may or may not have posed to his poetry, even the less-deceived Graves was not completely immune to a form of this fear. No doubt the spectre of Matthew Arnold, a poet who, it seemed to many, paid the price for going against the anti-theoretical grain of Victorian poetry with his own lyric gift, loomed large behind such reservations.

In response to the oppositional attitude of his poet-friends, Graves makes a pragmatic case for the absolute necessity of analytical thought to contemporary poetry: ‘I would reply... that if this analytic spirit is rife among the reading public, the poet must be analyst, too, and if the reader digs deep and undermines the poet, the poet must countermine even deeper’.¹²⁸ Whereas the Georgian conception of the poet’s mind is implicitly likened to a delicate ‘flowerbed’, vulnerable to overzealous digging, Graves’s use of the military term ‘countermine’¹²⁹ suggests that he views it as a battlefield where digging is nothing less than a matter of survival. The above passage also brings to mind a brief chapter from *On English Poetry* entitled ‘The Analytic Spirit’ in which Graves identifies the origins of, what he takes to be, the modern reader’s heightened critical powers:

In England, since – shall we name the convenient date 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition? – the educated reading public has developed

¹²⁷ Lawrence Lipking, ‘Poet-critics’, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume VII: Modernism and the New Criticism*, ed. A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, Lawrence Rainey, H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.439.

¹²⁸ *PU*, p.78.

¹²⁹ According to the *OED*, a countermine is ‘a mine dug to intercept another dug by an enemy’. At one point in *Goodbye to All That* Graves describes the ‘duel of mining and countermining’ that went on during battle. *GTAT*(57), p.102.

analytical powers which have not been generally matched by a corresponding development of the co-ordinating arts of the poet. Old charms will no longer hold, old baits will no longer be taken; the reader has become too wary.¹³⁰

As the embodiment, in many ways, of the radical scientific and technological developments of the mid-nineteenth-century, the Great Exhibition bore witness to the emergence of an England that was newly urbanised and increasingly secular. This shift inevitably brought with it, Graves implies, a profoundly sceptical and inquisitive reading public. Just as large sections of the populace were growing intellectually impatient with the strictures of the Anglican church, many readers, Graves argues, were becoming less and less convinced by the 'old charms' of poetry: 'The analytic spirit has been, I believe, responsible both for the present coma of religion among our educated classes and for the disrespect into which poetry and the fine arts have fallen.'¹³¹ While Graves highlights the nineteenth-century roots of the analytic spirit, he noticeably refrains from commenting on its more immediate, early twentieth-century manifestations. Indeed, it is difficult not to view Graves's vision of the new reader in relation to the rigorous critical techniques that were made commonplace in intellectual life by Eliot's *Sacred Wood* just a couple of years earlier; not to mention the rise of increasingly 'difficult' avant-garde literature in general during the First World War.

In *On English Poetry* Graves suggests that many poets have gone wrong by over-compensating for what they perceive to be the reader's newly acquired critical adroitness; either with technically fiendish verse forms or with anarchic Dadaist impenetrability.¹³² Whether poets employ an excess of design or a conspicuous lack of it, Graves maintains that neither extreme will persuade the modern reader to take their work seriously. While he perceptibly holds back from speculating on what might actually constitute this elusive middle road in *On English Poetry*, in *Poetic Unreason* Graves offers an altogether more direct approach to the problem he has sketched out. Since the 'common-reader' has seemingly become the critic *par excellence* via the rise of modernity, it befalls the modern (just as much as the modernist) poet to beat

¹³⁰ *OEP*, p.88.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p.88.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p.89.

him at his own hermeneutic game: 'if this analytic spirit is rife among the reading public, the poet must be analyst, too, and if the reader digs deep and undermines the poet, the poet must countermine even deeper'.¹³³ Just as immunisation often requires exposure to the disease, then, the modern poet must subject his or her work to a level of critical scrutiny exceeding that of even the most sophisticated reader. The implication is that poets who neglect this vital critical dimension run the risk of producing obvious, cliché-ed or outdated work. While this might seem, in itself, a statement of the obvious (Eliot said much the same thing in 1923 in 'The Function of Criticism',¹³⁴ as did Herbert Read in his 1925 article, 'Psycho-analysis and Literary Criticism'),¹³⁵ it was not, as we have seen, necessarily so for many of the author's non-modernist contemporaries.

Despite Graves's openly combative attitude towards the reader, it is notable that he does not share Eliot's belief, as outlined in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), that poetry must become 'more allusive' and, if necessary, 'dislocate' language in order to truthfully reflect the complex and chaotic conditions of modern existence.¹³⁶ Nowhere in Graves's critical writings does he suggest anything as obviously radical as *vers libre* or esoteric quotation. Far from raiding the newly available arsenal of modernist techniques (so potentially advantageous in his quest to outsmart the reader), Graves remained firmly, but by no means predictably, attached to the conventions of English poetry. How, then, does the poet 'countermine even deeper' than his audience? In Graves's view, it is a matter of writing with a profound understanding of one's own previous work:

Poetry contains a record of the fears, the aspirations and the philosophy of a poet's other selves, and any knowledge gained by analysis of this record will be helpful to him in future writing. When such analysis is possible the resultant knowledge will not bring a complete ending of all conflict, or more, necessarily, than a recognition of one phase of a long-standing conflict, one step only towards an eventual solution. As a result of the analysis there will be a renewed working of the conflict,

¹³³ *PU*, p.78.

¹³⁴ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.30.

¹³⁵ Herbert Read, *Selected Writings: Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.100.

¹³⁶ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p.289.

translated eventually into poetry of a very different character from what passed before.¹³⁷

According to Graves, knowledge of a particular psychological conflict does not, in itself, signal the resolution of that conflict; only a new phase in its development. This emphasis on the lyric's provisional nature (as merely 'one phase of a long-standing conflict') significantly alters *On English Poetry's* conception of the poem as a more or less complete solution to the conflict from which it arose.

By digging around in his own earlier lyrics, then, the poet is in no immediate danger of eradicating the source of his inspiration. On the contrary, Graves argues that analysis prevents the poet from remaining in the same phase of his conflict and producing work that is repetitive and formulaic as a result. From this perspective, the poet has a distinct advantage over his analytically-minded audience since, according to Graves, 'the only firm ground for analysis is one's own work in the light of one's own personal history'. In other words, the poet knows more about the personal circumstances surrounding the poem than anybody else and can therefore dig, or 'countermine', further into his work than even the most attentive reader. This idea would eventually be challenged by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in their famous article 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) and its contention that 'the work is measured against something *outside* the author [emphasis mine]'.¹³⁸ A few years later, Northrop Frye would also take this line in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), arguing that 'what [the poet] says has a peculiar interest, but not a peculiar authority'.¹³⁹ In the period following *Poetic Unreason's* publication, however, Eliot echoed Graves's notion of the poet as his own best reader; albeit in infinitely more circumspect terms:

A poet can try, of course, to give an honest report of the way in which he himself writes: the result may, if he is a good observer, be illuminating. And in one sense, but a very limited one, he knows better what his poems 'mean' than can anyone else; he may know the history of their composition, the material which has gone in and come out in

¹³⁷ *PU*, p.78-9.

¹³⁸ David Lodge (ed.), *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* (London and New York: Longman, 1991), p338.

¹³⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957, rpt 1990), p.5.

an unrecognisable form, and he knows what he was trying to do and what he was meaning to mean.¹⁴⁰

For Eliot, the sense in which the poet has the last critical word on his own works is ‘a very limited one’ because ‘what a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author; and indeed, in the course of time a poet may become merely a reader in respect to his own work, forgetting his original meaning – or without forgetting, merely changing.’¹⁴¹ As we shall see, Graves himself quite openly advocates ‘changing’ the meaning of past works during the process of revision; a tactic that sits uneasily with many of his critics.

After introducing his theory of the analytically-minded poet, Graves moves once again into the territory of personal anecdote as he gives an account of his experience preparing the lecture that formed the basis for chapter one of *Poetic Unreason*. In particular, he describes how he found himself ‘speculating on the nature of [his] audience’ and how this speculation led, in turn, to the unexpected writing of a limerick:

There once was a seedsman of Leeds,
A champion at telling his beads;
He told, so they say,
Twenty thousand a day,
The same prayer but at varying speeds.¹⁴²

Graves maintains that, far from being a straightforward piece of doggerel, this jotting actually provides ‘an interesting subject for analysis’.¹⁴³ He sets about proving this by attributing the rhyme to two related anxieties that he experienced in the run up to the lecture. The first relates to the challenge of making himself intelligible to an audience at Leeds University ‘where the mechanical and scientific interest was so strong’.¹⁴⁴ The second anxiety stemmed from Graves’s strong aversion to Roman Catholicism; an aversion that (he wrongly believed) might cause tension between himself and a Catholic friend who would also be present at the talk. According to Graves,

¹⁴⁰ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p.137.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.130.

¹⁴² *PU*, p.79.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p.79.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.79.

his lack of understanding in the fields of both modern engineering (he confesses to having ‘an anti-machinery’ sentiment) and Roman Catholicism find expression in the image of the seedsman. In the limerick’s first draft this figure had originally been a ‘*Lama* of Leeds’ since, in Graves’s view, ‘mechanics and Catholicism touch... in the Thibetan prayer-wheel inscribed with a thousand “om mane pudme hums”, one revolution of which is considered equivalent to repeating the holy phrase a thousand times, an act of considerable merit: the suggestion of *pater nosters* and *ave Marias* is clear’.¹⁴⁵ The poet, in other words, is no more able to understand the mechanics of a revolving wheel than he is able to comprehend the meaning behind a repeated prayer. Graves argues that the use of the word ‘Lama’ in the first line, with its connotations of prayer-wheels and so forth, makes the significance of the final line more obvious (‘The same prayer but at varying speeds’). He decided to switch to ‘seedsman’, however, because, for Graves, seeds have an association with both ‘great numbers’ and, in relation to Catholicism, with ‘seed-rosaries’: ‘each bead of which is a live germ that from the anti-Catholic standpoint can never come to fruition, because pierced and bound; and each bead is a dead prayer’.¹⁴⁶ In addition to this association, Graves explains that he recently discovered his friend was “‘constantly being seedy;”” a phrase that led to him being cast in ‘the curious guise of seedsman’.¹⁴⁷ At the end of this reading, Graves points out yet again that, although ‘Thought-connexions discovered in the imagery of dreams or poems will often appear grotesque to the analyst’, they should be taken in the context of their unconscious origins, where, he adds, ‘they are performing a serious function’.¹⁴⁸

Graves confesses to valuing poetry ‘which is continually developing new sequences of conflict and solution’ over verse that is ‘based on a philosophy and bound up in a sequence, the experience of which... is past history’.¹⁴⁹ For Graves, then, poetry that is the product of a fixed metaphysic or an unchanging personal conflict can only ever be retrospective in its implications, gesturing backwards to a prior realm of experience. Attributing

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p.80.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p.80.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p.80.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. p.80.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. p.81.

this preference to the fact that he is 'progressively inclined', not to mention 'highbrow', Graves is quick to distinguish himself from his modernist contemporaries by pointing out that such 'progressive' leanings do not invalidate 'poetry which continues to be written in older forms and on well-worn themes'.¹⁵⁰ Earlier on in the same chapter, Graves had made reference to his 'anti-machinery sentiment,' reminding us of his neurasthenic fear of trains, telephones and other forms of modern technology that remained inextricably bound up in his mind with the experience of war. Graves's particular brand of 'progressiveness' seems to be dependent less on a drive to 'make it new' than on a dread of creative stasis whereby once-fertile ideas harden into artistically-barren doctrine or mere self-imitation.

Graves highlights one possible objection to his ideal of the self-aware, self-analysing poet by quoting an imaginary reader who argues: "once we become conscious through analysis of the meaning of a piece of poetic symbolism, we can never again get that curious thrill which means an unconscious apprehension of a latent allegory". Just as the Georgians feared that digging into the substratum of their poems would be tantamount to killing the goose that lays the golden eggs, Graves's imaginary reader feels that a poem's success is largely dependent on the concealment, or half-concealment, of its latent meanings. Once these have been dragged out into the hard light of intellectual analysis the poem becomes nothing more than a shell emptied of its life-source and the reader can never again encounter the tantalising mystery which makes the first reading such a singular experience. Graves answers this charge by referring to Japanese poetry 'where', he claims, 'the latent allusory content is understood and systematized' only to be re-examined in order to arrive at a further 'layer of secondary allusion below the layer of which the reader is expected to have rational knowledge'.¹⁵¹ It is in this elusive layer of meaning, which exists beyond even the latent content, that the lyric's real 'poetic value is found'. In an undated letter to Edward Marsh, written sometime in July 1922, Graves explains his theory in distinctly Freudian terms:

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p.81.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p.81.

My idea is, Eddie, that though there may be an outcry against this analysis habit of mine, I can't stop it in myself, and actually it has no dangerous effect on poetry because one can't analyse beyond a certain point, and below that point is the unconscious which after all is the starting point of poetry. Surface analysis will only prevent writing by formula and the experience gained will enable the unconscious to create work with greater depth and sincerity than before.¹⁵²

Just as Freud believes that 'Every dream has at least one point where it eludes explanation – a sort of umbilicus linking it to the unknown',¹⁵³ Graves argues that, when it comes to the enigma of the poem's origins, 'beyond a certain point' analysis must indeed 'lay down its arms'. This sense of an ultimate boundary or precipice, however, does not preclude the reader from exploring the manifold possibilities that lead up to and around it. On the contrary, Graves maintains that, 'far from killing poetry [analysis] gives it greater complexity, richness and, to use a metaphor from thermodynamics, entropy'. In this schema, literary value is equated with a lyric's capacity to generate countless readings from a single, mysteriously unassailable poetic core. For the poet, analysis reveals to him his own hidden conflicts, forcing those conflicts to take on different, more complex forms in the equally unassailable realm of the unconscious; which, as Graves puts it, is 'the starting point of poetry'.

'I am told,' Graves writes, 'that I have no right to say that a modern poet ought to be an analyst if he wants his work to last beyond his own generation'.¹⁵⁴ This indirect, but unmistakable, statement of long-term literary ambition is particularly noteworthy given that, a decade or so later, Graves would disavow (a little too vehemently perhaps to be wholly convincing) any such posthumous career-plans: 'To evoke posterity / Is to weep on your own grave / Ventriloquizing for the unborn'.¹⁵⁵ The Graves of *Poetic Unreason*, however, is rather more open about his desire to occupy a place within the upper echelons of literary history. In a bid to elucidate his personal reasons for promoting analysis as 'the best possible preventative against writing by formula' Graves explains how he came to take up the role of poetic theorist:

¹⁵² *SL1*, p.142.

¹⁵³ Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.135.

¹⁵⁴ *PU*, p.82.

¹⁵⁵ 'To Evoke Posterity', *CP2*, p.96.

I have been led to take an interest in this analytic business partly to give a hereditary scientific interest more scope and partly to find relief from a war neurosis from which I occasionally suffer. Yet the analyst in me is not identical with the poet, he is only one of many subpersonalities, and formed in relation with a group of my intimate friends who have this scientific interest strongly developed: he is their spokesman in the parliament of Jekylls and Hydes.¹⁵⁶

The 'hereditary scientific interest' to which Graves refers at the beginning of this passage is presumably loosely connected to the logical, puzzle-solving bent of his father's family, as described in *Goodbye to All That*.¹⁵⁷ It also suggests that Graves was already possessed of an analytical turn of mind before encountering the likes of Rivers and Mallik. While we might expect the poet to find 'relief' from his neurosis through the writing of cathartic verse, the idea that literary analysis (which, as we have seen, is intimately bound up with Graves's creative process) might also serve this function is, perhaps, more surprising. As a discipline, literary criticism is not, after all, traditionally associated with the kind of emotional release that is almost synonymous with Romantic poetry. Indeed, the author's note to *Poetic Unreason* suggests that the book's development eventually took on the form of an exorcism of sorts, as Graves confesses: 'I have cast and re-cast it nine times, and found necessary to write two other books before I could finally *get rid of it* [emphasis mine]'. By the same token, the Great War is still generally regarded as a catalyst for lyric poetry, as opposed to poetic theory. In this light, Graves would appear to be a writer of 'war poetics' rather than, or as well as, war poetry; prompting us to consider what this curiously unformulated genre might entail.

Graves's contention that 'the analyst in me is not identical with the poet, he is only one of many subpersonalities', presents further problems. Not only does the practice of analysis play, as we shall see, a central role in the genesis of Graves's poems, his criticism is incontestably written from the idiosyncratic perspective of a practicing poet. Whereas some poet-critics, like Eliot for example, are able, to a greater or lesser extent, to keep their twin disciplines at a conspicuous remove, Graves appears to do everything in his power to tangle them up, often publishing coolly analytical verse alongside

¹⁵⁶ *PU*, p.82.

¹⁵⁷ *GTAT(57)*, p.16.

wildly imaginative critical prose. Indeed, the markedly *unscientific* tone of Graves's criticism, in comparison to that of a critic like I. A. Richards, makes it difficult to regard its author as any kind of 'spokesman' for the scientifically-minded. Regardless of this apparent disparity, Graves goes on to reaffirm his vision, as sketched out in *On English Poetry*, of the poet as an intellectual jack of all trades:

I do continue to say that the poet in the fullest sense of the word must stand in the middle of the larger society to which he belongs and reconcile in his poetry the conflicting views of every group, trade, class and interest in that society; he must be before he is a poet in any full sense, scientist, philosopher, mechanic, clerk, bagman, journalist, aye, and beadsman-seedsman – not less than natural historian, litterateur, child and lover, which are the limited aspects of Georgianism.¹⁵⁸

Ironically enough, Graves would also eventually restrict himself, in a very different way, to these 'limited aspects' under the auspices of the White Goddess. C. K. Stead, for example, takes the view that Graves's later poetry 'show[s] the Georgian technique brought to perfection'.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* he and Riding pour out scorn on the kind of poet who, like Tennyson, attempts to make poetry into 'a constantly broadening institution, embodying from period to period all the rapidly developing specialized forms of knowledge, enlarging itself by broadening the definition of poetry to include psychology, applied theories of music and painting, philosophy, physical science and so on'.¹⁶⁰ In the above passage, however, Graves clearly shows a commitment to broadening the horizons of modern poetry and leaving behind, what he perceives to be, the restrictions of Georgian verse. Graves's own poetry from this period attempts to realise this ambitious ideal by moving on from the pastoral and overtly psychological settings of *Country Sentiment* and *The Pier-Glass*, to incorporate train journeys, college debates, philosophical dialogues, diplomatic relations and even a boxing match. We get a roll-call of job titles comparable to the one

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 82.

¹⁵⁹ C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1964, rpt 1975), p.94.

¹⁶⁰ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, ed. Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p.78.

outlined above in the 1925 satirical poem 'Diversions', as the speaker attempts to press an editor into paying him for some as-yet unprinted poems:

The milkmen, the coalman,
And the oilman, a droll man,
Are knocking at my door
Louder and worse and more;
And had I the courage
I would charge you the demurrage
Of the poems yet sleeping
In your close keeping...¹⁶¹

There are shades of Poe's 'The Raven' in the lines 'knocking at my door / Louder and worse and more'. The poem's rhetoric plays on the supposition that the poet is just another working-man akin, in his financial needs, to 'milkmen, the coalman / And the oilman'. Like these figures, the speaker demands payment in order to earn his keep. This anti-romantic vision of the poet as an individual who is subject to the economic forces of everyday life works against the notion that the artist is somehow 'above' the socio-political fray of his times – a notion that Graves would later wholeheartedly embrace.

According to Graves, Chaucer and Shakespeare were the only poets to achieve 'the feat of representative spokesmanship for the nation' (though his beloved Skelton also gets a slightly dubious honourable mention).¹⁶² He goes on to argue that it would be unviable to attempt to write poetry like Shakespeare in the context of the nineteen twenties, primarily because Shakespeare's particular brand of 'spokesmanship' cannot, for obvious historical reasons, apply itself to contemporary developments in 'philosophy, science, mechanics, and commerce'.¹⁶³ In Graves's view, the inevitable absence of these subjects from Shakespeare's canon (and, presumably the canons of other poets who have achieved 'classic' status), has led many poets to treat them as unsuitable material for poetry. The question that Graves is driving at here seems to be: how does a contemporary poet incorporate subject matter that would be wholly alien to his poetic master or masters? The failure of the Georgians, for Graves, lies precisely in their inability or unwillingness to broach this kind of material and their determination to stick exclusively to

¹⁶¹ *CPI*, p.258.

¹⁶² *PU*, p.82.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p.83.

subjects that would be easily recognisable to poets of a bygone age. Because they inadvertently make certain themes taboo for future generations of writers, Graves argues that indisputably major figures like Shakespeare take on the form of gods or bogeymen, that are ‘used by the literary critics to frighten the youth’.¹⁶⁴ This description puts us in mind of Graves’s poem ‘The God Called Poetry’ and its dream-like amalgamation of two of literature’s greatest bogeymen: Shakespeare and Marlowe. There is also perhaps more than a hint of what Harold Bloom would later label ‘the anxiety of influence’ in Graves’s theory, as the poet is charged with the task of struggling against the potentially fatal strangle-hold of his or her most powerful literary predecessors.

In a passage that flirts heavily with the manifesto culture of the time, Graves sums up his vision of ‘The new Poetry’: ‘it must be a reconciliation of scientific and philosophic theory on the one hand and the old pulse of love and fear on the other, and when it first appears the purely literary press will explode against its unintelligibility and its divergence from fixed standards and the scientific press will disregard it’.¹⁶⁵ We find a precursor to this idea in the introductory note to Graves’s poem-sequence *The Feather Bed* (1923), which would have been completed around the time he was beginning work on *Poetic Unreason*. This curious, essay-like foreword proposes that the Jewish idea of God evolved over three distinct stages, beginning with the creation of human beings in their most rudimentary biological form: ‘There is God the creator of the race of man, but of man still animal of the animals... let us call that God, Saturn’.¹⁶⁶ According to Graves’s schema, the development of humankind brought with it a conflict between ‘the old heritage of self-seeking instinct’ and ‘a new principle of social order found necessary for the survival of the race.’¹⁶⁷ As a result, Graves argues, the original deity split up into two and a second God, Jehovah, was born. The third and final stage of this progress narrative is presided over by Lucifer, the Morning Star who, in Graves’s view, represents the possibility of a future reconciliation between Saturn, God of primitive instincts, and Jehovah, God of civilization. This desire to reconcile the past with the present is also central to the modernist

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p.83.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. pp.83-4.

¹⁶⁶ *CPI*, p.389.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. p.389.

project, informing, in very different ways, the work of Eliot, Pound and Joyce. Their writing was (and is) charged with ‘unintelligibility’ and ‘divergence from fixed standards’. However, given Graves’s faithfulness to syntactic intelligibility, I suspect that he is alluding to a different kind of challenge to the one presented by his modernist contemporaries. He seems to be suggesting that the new poetry will incorporate subject matter that has hitherto been regarded as unsuitable for treatment in verse and that this incongruity will prove, initially, to be a source of immense difficulty to future readers. In order to illustrate this point, Graves cites Darwin and his admission that, by the end of his life, he had become so steeped in scientific thought that he was unable to appreciate poetry. This, Graves argues, is evidence that ‘poetry embodying the scientific experience had not yet been written’, for, had it been, Darwin would have had no difficulty in reading it. He goes on to point out that, rather than closing, the gap between science and poetry has widened, with either side remaining hostile and unaccommodating toward the other. John Carey echoes this argument by maintaining that ‘modern poets avoid science... it seems, because they feel inferior to it, not (like Coleridge) superior’.¹⁶⁸ Though Graves champions science as an underrepresented subject, he also characteristically refuses to ‘take sides’ and limits himself to outlining ‘the rival views’ as he understands them.

Graves concedes, however, that some poets have attempted to bridge what he sees as the considerable gap between science and verse. Francis Thompson is once again cited as ‘a poet with a passion for science, but it was a passion which his religion forbade him to indulge’.¹⁶⁹ He also makes reference to Walter de la Mare’s lines:

I saw sweet Poetry turn troubled eyes
 On shaggy science nosing in the grass,
 For by that way poor Poetry must pass
 On her long pilgrimage to Paradise...¹⁷⁰

Graves implicitly laments the fact that de la Mare has since abandoned this position and now ‘inclines to the mystic idea of outside control by spirits

¹⁶⁸ John Carey, ed. *The Faber Book of Science* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995, rpt 2005), p.xxii.

¹⁶⁹ *PU*, p.84.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p.85.

accounting for the genesis of poetry'.¹⁷¹ Later on in *Poetic Unreason* Graves devotes a short chapter to this very subject, in which he challenges the idea of "possession" by discarnate spirits' and posits instead a psychoanalytic theory of unconscious poetic influence.¹⁷² According to Graves, de la Mare was put forward by *The Times Literary Supplement* as 'the greatest of our modern lyricists'. Given his status as 'a poet of escape', Graves argues that this decision does not mean that de la Mare is 'absolutely good or bad' (though the author expresses his own long-term admiration) only that 'modern society is in such confusion that the greatest service a poet can do it is to provide a temporary escape to the Lubberland of fantasy'.¹⁷³ Obviously de la Mare's privileged position in the English literary press profoundly informed Graves's conclusion, as reported to Edmund Blunden a few years earlier, that 'War-poetry is played out... Country Sentiment is the most acceptable dope now'.¹⁷⁴ Graves goes on to equate the 'desire to escape' with the aforementioned 'theory of control by spirits', pointing out that both signal 'a shifting of responsibility' away from the individual.¹⁷⁵ In Graves's view, poets, readers and critics are all equally lost, 'and few with even the courage of scepticism'. By this point, then, we can infer that Graves has clearly steered well away from his own escapist phase and is adopting a responsible, sceptical stance towards, what he regards as, the illusions propagated by much modern poetry.

Graves describes an objection raised to the argument of his book by a friend named Arthur Clutton Brock who proposed that, while we may discover the historical and psychological details surrounding a work of art, these factors are, in the end, of very little importance to understanding 'the creative urge'. In particular, Brock cites Graves's reading of *The Tempest*, which appears a little later on in the book, and argues that 'though the idea of Caliban may have clothed itself in the various historical trappings which you have identified... the idea is independent of history, and whatever life Shakespeare might have led, whatever contact with books and people he might have had,

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p.85.

¹⁷² Ibid. p.241.

¹⁷³ Ibid. p.85.

¹⁷⁴ *SLI*, p.113.

¹⁷⁵ *PU*, p.85.

that Caliban theme would have remained in essence the same'.¹⁷⁶ Graves responds by highlighting the epistemological nature of his project and implicitly drawing parallels between literary criticism and psychoanalysis. He concedes that, 'to put too much emphasis on... history and psychology as we understand these sciences is certainly wrong', but only because 'both are in their infancy'.¹⁷⁷ In other words, if *more* could be discovered about the psychological and historical circumstances surrounding a work of art's conception and genesis, there would be no problem. As Graves puts it: 'Really to understand Caliban, enormously more history has to be discovered, beside which our present knowledge seems negligible.'¹⁷⁸ By apparently sticking to his guns, Graves not only emphasises the importance of 'facts' to his, often fanciful, critical practice; he also reveals an obsessive interest in, seemingly, *all* aspects of any given author's background. He illustrates this by reaming off the various details that need to be taken into consideration for a full appreciation of a character like Caliban; details that include Shakespeare's childhood, the relationship between his parents, 'ante-natal influences and the psychology of the ante-natal state' (whatever this might entail), 'the whole heredity of the Shakespeare and the Arden families' and, most implausibly of all, 'the same sort of knowledge about everybody with whom Shakespeare ever came into contact'.¹⁷⁹

This kind of panoramic data is, of course, well beyond even the professional biographer's reach, let alone that of the humble literary critic. It soon becomes clear, however, that Graves is making a rhetorical rather than a literal point (though, given his exhaustive approach to interpretation, one suspects he would genuinely like to get his hands on the above information): 'But because our knowledge is so scanty it does not help us much to give up altogether and say that it is no good trying to know anything and that we may as well jettison our meagre cargo of thought altogether and rely entirely on intuition.'¹⁸⁰ While Graves admits that a reader may be able to intuit the meaning of a text with little or no understanding of the historic context in

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. p.86.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p.86

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. p.87.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p.87.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p.87.

which it was produced, a phenomenon which he likens to religious ‘grace’, there can be no denying, he argues, the importance of knowledge to the vast majority of reading experiences. For Graves, the desire for an intuitive ‘short-cut’ that bypasses all research is symptomatic of ‘lazy, baffled or ignorant minds’ and signals yet ‘another form of romantic escape’.¹⁸¹ This anti-romantic stance is particularly interesting coming from Graves, since, with *The White Goddess*, he would introduce the so-called ‘analeptic method’ whereby the poet is able to make supra-logical interpretative leaps. Though there are seeds of this approach in the more imaginative moments of *Poetic Unreason*, Graves is clearly equally committed to the scholarly side of literary analysis; even if his own scholarship is often dubious. He has little time for the idea that we can understand more about a poem by coming to it in, to borrow F. R. Leavis’s term, a state of ‘precritical innocence’: ‘if we had no knowledge the poem would convey to us as little as the yet undeciphered inscriptions on Etruscan tombs or Mya [sic] tablets’.¹⁸² In a statement that anticipates William Empson’s belief that ‘some pretence of understanding the feelings of the author in hand’ lies at the very ‘roots of criticism’,¹⁸³ Graves sums up his position: ‘Appreciation of a poem means nothing less than a certain intimate knowledge of the author’.¹⁸⁴ This refusal to disregard the biographical element of a work in favour of absolute fidelity to the text clearly sets Graves apart, as it does Empson, from the austerities of what would later become known as the New Criticism.

Despite his apparent sympathy for anti-romantic scholarship over readerly intuition, Graves once again claims to ‘take no sides’. Instead he believes that ‘such disagreements can end when both parties realise that there are new analytic methods which literary criticism never had at its disposal before’.¹⁸⁵ By ‘new analytic methods’, Graves appears to be referring to an increase in accessibility to information, which ‘may provide us with an intimate knowledge of certain phases of an obscure poet’s life which before

¹⁸¹ Ibid. p.88.

¹⁸² Ibid. p.89.

¹⁸³ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p.xiii.

¹⁸⁴ *PU*, p.89.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. p.89.

were mere blanks'.¹⁸⁶ In the future, Graves argues, these two antagonistic approaches to literary criticism will grow ever closer and eventually merge into a single discipline. For the moment, however, he contends that analysis should complement rather than supplant the 'emotional' reading of a text:

Analysis is everywhere now, and neither religion, poetry, art, nor any other interest can afford it disregard it; but I am far from suggesting that the poet, the artist and the religiously inclined person should be dominated by any particular analytic technique, which often destroys what it pretends to explain. The generalizations of modern science – which cannot afford to respect the individual as being something unique, something bigger than an aggregate of classifiable factors – are more than usually inadequate for the analysis of poems of emotional conflict.¹⁸⁷

Graves maintains that, on the most fundamental level, a reader must be in a mood analogous to the poet's when he wrote the poem, and this sense of identification necessarily transcends scientific classification or analysis. However, he is also quick to point out that sympathy with the author does not mean that conscious analysis can be forgone; only that it must take place in the wake of intuitive understanding, without which there can be no significant advancement:

To put it plainly, the only hopeful study of poetry is by examining the phase of mental conflict in the reader which allowed him to appreciate by analogy the emotional force of certain symbols and rhythms, and by then comparing this phase analytically with a phase of conflict in the mind of the poet, which historic research suggests as having given birth to the poem.¹⁸⁸

So, if a reader is struck by a poem, he or she must look within and attempt to identify the conflict that the poem has stirred. Once this has been done, he or she can search for an analogous conflict in the poet's life, with the help of the poem itself and any known biographical details. Graves maintains that, though he doesn't always reveal the personal conflicts that allow him to analyse a particular poem, they are always present behind the reading:

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. p.89.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p.92.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p.93.

In giving particular analyses of emotional or other poetry I do not, however, always elaborate, as I did in the case of the James-Essex problem of Hamlet, the particular personal experience which gave me an insight into the psychology of the piece under discussion; but my readers must assume that in every case the analysis is based either on an examination of my own appreciative reactions to a poem or those of my friends, or both.¹⁸⁹

Like the poem, then, the analysis also has a manifest and a latent content; a parallel that further highlights the peculiarly dialectical relationship between Graves's verse and prose output.

Graves argues that 'even when reading dithyrambic poetry of advanced grammatical disintegration', the reader cannot achieve 'Complete dissociation from the manifest statement'. This is because 'the eye will skip and snatch at random phrases as it goes by, and from winds and wands, death and nightingales, violet-wreaths and surcease, build up impressionistically a definite structure capable of subsequent intellectual classification.'¹⁹⁰ Graves and Riding would later brilliantly demonstrate this process in relation to e. e. cummings's typically impressionistic poem 'Sunset' in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, building up a comparable 'definite structure'.¹⁹¹ Although Graves refrains from writing poetry of 'advanced grammatical disintegration' in the vein of his modernist contemporaries, it is significant that he does not, at this stage, dismiss such verse as meaningless. On the contrary, he argues that 'All poetry written under emotional stress, although its manifest statement suggests a form of mental disintegration, has a latent meaning which the reader of emotional sympathy will be able subsequently to grasp and present intellectually as a history of conflict.'¹⁹² Presumably the opposite is also true, as Graves's highly-polished, grammatically coherent poems often conceal a fragmented underside, suggesting a parallel 'form of mental disintegration'.

Graves concludes the chapter by turning his attention to two passages by Allardyce Nicoll from a recently published school textbook on Blake. The first of these summarises Blake's 'philosophic system' via the famous closing lines of 'The Book of Thel', while the second undercuts any recourse to such a

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. p.93.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. pp.94-5.

¹⁹¹ Riding and Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, pp.5-16.

¹⁹² *PU*, p.95.

system by contending that 'Blake as a poet must be studied emotionally for the pure beauty of his verse and for such symbolic messages as he is able to give us without having recourse to huge depressing tabulae of well-nigh meaningless names'.¹⁹³ By means of a response to this argument, Graves quotes at length from a press review he wrote about Nicholl some time earlier. In Graves's view, Nicholl's idea that Blake's verse can be appreciated for its 'pure beauty' in isolation from 'the philosophic workings of his mind' is tantamount to wheeling out the old adage: 'I don't know anything about poetry, but I *do know* what I like'.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, Graves argues, it contradicts Nicholl's first passage in which he maintains that 'Unless we know at least a fragment of the System the full meaning of this and of other works of Blake cannot possibly be fathomed'.¹⁹⁵ According to Graves, Nicholl takes the opposite tack in the second passage because he discovers that the 'System' to which he alludes does not explain the more difficult Prophetic Books. In answer to this charge, Nicholl apparently wrote to Graves privately, arguing that 'thought alone will not make poetry; the exquisite expressing of even well-worn truths will. While therefore a study of Blake's philosophical system undoubtedly increases our appreciation of this work, the poet's primal worth must come from his song-weaving power'.¹⁹⁶ In the light of this statement, Graves retracts his claim that Nicholl contradicts himself and sums-up the latter's position in the following terms: 'even when our knowledge of the poetic symbolism breaks down we may have a knowledge on the plane of music'.¹⁹⁷ Though Graves finds this idea to be 'legitimate', he regards it as nothing more than a partial solution to the problem of understanding verse: 'the knowledge gained is no longer a knowledge of poetry as a harmony of experience on every plane, since we have no clue to the symbolic content'.¹⁹⁸ In other words, musical appreciation alone is no substitute for conscious analysis. There is always, as Graves puts it in *On English Poetry*, 'the dead load of sense' to take into consideration. What is perhaps most interesting about Graves's account of Nicholl's argument, however, is his implicit

¹⁹³ Ibid. p.97.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p.97.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p.96.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. pp.97-8.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. p.98.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p.98.

insistence that verse cannot be appreciated in isolation from the philosophic workings of the poet's mind. Although, earlier on in the same chapter, Graves claims to mistrust poetry that is the product of a fixed metaphysic, he clearly believes in the importance of a poet's theories to the understanding of his or her verse. In this respect, we can take it that Graves's own poetic theories were composed with the intention of elucidating, whether directly or indirectly, the meaning of his lyrics.

IV. 'VISION IN THE REPAIR-SHOP': SECONDARY ELABORATION

Graves begins the following chapter, 'Secondary Elaboration', with a long quotation from Rivers's *Conflict and Dream*; a quotation that he also paraphrases in the final chapter of *The Meaning of Dreams*. In this passage Rivers draws attention to, what he takes to be, the similarities between 'the mechanism of the production of poetry' and that of dream. He argues that, as with the dream, the poem's manifest content is often a symbolic expression of 'some conflict which is raging in the mind of the poet' and 'the real underlying meaning or latent content of the poem is very different from that which the outward imagery would suggest'.¹⁹⁹ Rivers also points out that poems, like dreams, contain apparently simple images that, when analysed, reveal a mass of heterogeneous experiences condensed into a single figure. Since he is not a poet, Rivers confesses that he cannot prove this theory; though he goes on to argue that, just as a dream can only be fully elucidated by (or with the help of) the dreamer himself, 'the real mechanism of artistic production' can only be understood by the artist who analyses his own work.²⁰⁰ At this point Graves acknowledges his profound debt to Rivers's theories by interjecting with the following declaration: 'I must here admit that it was personal friendship for Dr. Rivers, admiration for his book, *Instinct and*

¹⁹⁹ Rivers, *Conflict and Dream*, p.148.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p.149.

the Unconscious, and the encouragement he gave me in my writing of *On English Poetry* that has made this book take the shape and title it has taken.²⁰¹ After making this brief acknowledgement, Graves picks up from where he left off with his extract from *Conflict and Dream*, quoting a paragraph in which Rivers argues that ‘The poem as we read it is very rarely the immediate product of poetic activity, but has been the subject of a lengthy process of a critical kind comparable with that which Freud has called the secondary elaboration of the dream.’²⁰² In order to understand the ‘part of artistic production which is comparable with the formation of the dream,’ Rivers maintains that we must study ‘the immediate, unelaborated product of the poet’s mind’; that is to say, the first draft.

After drawing his lengthy quotation to a close, Graves proclaims: ‘I am in almost complete agreement with this paragraph’ and goes on to cite his reading of an early version of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ in *On English Poetry* as evidence. Since ‘Secondary elaboration varies very much with the individual poem’, Graves announces that he will provide two examples from his own work of what he calls ‘surface and structural repairs’.²⁰³ Before doing so, he summarises once more the process of secondary elaboration and its relation to what Rivers calls ‘the immediate product of poetic activity’:

After a first draft has been hurriedly and emotionally written, the mind becomes conscious of it in more than one classifying aspect, as a grammatical entity, a piece of history, a rhyme-scheme, a piece of word music, and so on. The poet’s mind when concerned with the more elemental aspects of the conflict did not, the classifying eye will say, cross the t’s and dot the i’s of its conception; then between the interests dominant in the emotional state and the interests dominant in the intellectual state a conflict ensues apparently in terms of mere verbal re-arrangement, but really involving profounder differences also. This conflict may find no solution for a while (when the piece is put away in a drawer as a hopelessly bad piece of work) or the conflict may be only a slight one and easily resolved.²⁰⁴

What begins as a simple exercise in tidying-up becomes something altogether more complicated, as the conscious mind discovers that it is in conflict with

²⁰¹ *PU*, p.100.

²⁰² *Ibid.* p.100.

²⁰³ *Ibid.* p.101.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p.101.

the actual content of the first draft and not just its surface imperfections. In this schema, conceptions of surface and structure become almost indistinguishable. This was not the case in *On English Poetry*, however, where the division between unconscious first draft and finished poem was more sharply drawn. As if to demonstrate this, Graves reprints the chapter from that volume which charts, draft-by-draft, the genesis of his poem 'Cynics and Romantics' as an example of 'surface repair'. After doing so, he reveals that the account was criticised 'in some weekly review by a poet who questioned whether actually I formulated these considerations in the way that they appear above'.²⁰⁵ Answering the charge with an indignant 'of course I did not', Graves goes on to maintain that he is still in possession of the original drafts as evidence of the poem's development. Furthermore, he argues that 'the knowledge of my poetic method at the time of writing the poem enabled me later to make a rational account of why I changed this or that'.²⁰⁶ This explanation suggests that the conscious revisions were, in fact, not so conscious after all. If they were, why would Graves need to refer back to his 'poetic method' in order to 'make a rational account' of his alterations? Surely they would be self-evident.

Graves's second example of secondary elaboration demonstrates the process of structural, as opposed to surface repair. The poem under scrutiny this time is 'The Bedpost', a lyric from *Whipperginny*²⁰⁷ that first appeared, in a more rudimentary form, under the title 'Betsy' in Graves's never-published typescript collection 'The Patchwork Flag'.²⁰⁸ Along with a handful of other poems, 'The Bedpost' is described in the 'Author's Note' to *Whipperginny* as 'bankrupt stock of 1918'.²⁰⁹ Before entering into the analysis, Graves writes: 'I must apologize for giving the intimate history of the poem, but it is important for the argument.'²¹⁰ This plea for forgiveness in the face of literary

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p.103.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p.103.

²⁰⁷ *CPI*, p.139-141.

²⁰⁸ Graves put together the 'The Patchwork Flag' in the summer of 1918, but, under the advisement of Siegfried Sassoon, decided against publishing it. Most of the thirty-eight poems eventually found their way into *Country Sentiment*, with a few others turning up in subsequent volumes. See Dominic Hibberd, "'The Patchwork Flag' (1918): an unrecorded book by Robert Graves", *Review of English Studies* (14:164), p.521-32 (1990).

²⁰⁹ *CPI*, p.372.

²¹⁰ *PU*, p.104.

impropriety is reminiscent of Freud's indirect apology to the reader before analysing one of his own dreams in the section of *Interpreting Dreams* entitled 'Dream Distortion': 'I want to illustrate this with another dream of mine, which again calls for a great many indiscretions, but by way of compensating for this personal sacrifice sheds a great deal of light on the problem.'²¹¹ In the spirit of confession, then, Graves's reading of 'The Bedpost' is prefaced by a short account of his personal situation in the run-up to the poem's composition:

After having been three times in France and wounded, I came home suffering from "shell shock." In January, 1918, I married and was certified as temporarily unfit to return to my battalion. But the spring of that year was so disastrous for our armies that it looked as though after all I would be bound to go back, whether fit or not, before the year was out. Meanwhile my thoughts were much concerned with the prospect of a family, and for the first time I realised fully the stupidity of getting killed instead of living happily ever after with my wife and the child that we were expecting.²¹²

This account immediately sets up an opposition between the poet's old commitment to his regiment and the act of seeing out the War and a new desire for fairytale-like family bliss (or 'living happily ever after'). A parallel tension was being played out in Graves's writing-life, as he veered between the nursery escapism of *Country Sentiment* and the psychological realism of *The Pier-Glass*. 'The Bedpost', as we shall see, stages both of these conflicts simultaneously, interweaving them until they are rendered almost indistinguishable.

Graves first reprints the poem as it appeared 'after three drafts or so'. At this stage the lyric was still titled 'Betsy', though, as Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward point out in their editorial notes,²¹³ the seven stanzas of the version that appeared in 'The Patchwork Flag' had already expanded to eight. The poem follows a more or less straightforward ballad meter, alternating between four and three-stress lines and employing a regular abcb rhyme scheme. The rhythm however is (with the marked exception of lines 23, 29 and 31) trochaic, while the first and third lines of each quatrain have feminine

²¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, p.150.

²¹² *PU*, p.104.

²¹³ *CP1*, p.373.

endings. The final line, which could be read as two consecutive spondees (““Good-night; Good-night””), also appears to complicate the poem’s otherwise symmetrical arrangement. As well as being a nursery rhyme for his unborn child, ‘Betsy’ was also written as one of a series of songs to be performed by Edward Marsh’s friend Ivor Novello.²¹⁴ It begins:

Sleepy Betsy from her pillow
Sees the shadow tall
Of her mother’s wooden bedpost
Flung upon the wall.

Now this grave and kindly warrior
With his small round head
Tells her stories of old battles
As she lies in bed.

The poem envisions the poet’s unborn child as a little girl who, half-way to sleep, imaginatively transforms the silhouette of ‘her mother’s wooden bedpost’ into a benevolent male storyteller. Although the bestead belongs to Betsy’s mother, the inescapably phallic description of this shadowy narrator suggests that he might also be a father figure and, given his military bearing and ‘grave’ disposition, perhaps even a version of the poet himself. In many respects, he appears to be an inversion of the demonic stranger who stands by the bed of the speaker of Graves’s 1917 poem ‘A Child’s Nightmare’, endlessly chanting: ““Cat!...Cat!...Cat!””.²¹⁵ Though we cannot say with any certainty whether or not Graves read ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1917) before writing his poem, the image of the bedpost’s outline ‘Flung upon the wall’ also unquestionably recalls Prufrock’s vision of nerves thrown ‘in patterns on a screen’.²¹⁶

Throughout the remainder of the poem Betsy listens as the shadow tells her of ‘the Emperor and the Farmer’ who fought alongside each other until ‘they gained the sea,’ of ‘the sons of Ehud Vigo’ who avenged their father’s death by catching and skinning the ogre responsible: ‘Old Cro-bar-cru,’ of the two brothers ‘Will and Abel’ who fought ‘the giant Gog’ and ‘threw him into Stony Cataract / In the land of Og,’ of ‘a girl called Ann

²¹⁴ Hibberd, 1990, p.522.

²¹⁵ *CP1*, pp.58-9.

²¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974, rpt 2002), p.6.

Clarissa' who 'fell in love with Will,' and of Gog's wife, who stole away Abel's 'arms and armour' and turned him into the bedpost that now looms large upon the wall. As a catalogue of outlandish nocturnal yarns, the poem is vaguely reminiscent of *The Thousand and One Nights*, albeit on a much smaller scale, with Abel taking the place of Scheherazade's ingenious narrator. Betsy, however, has little time for the romance of Will and Ann Clarissa or the tragic fate of Abel and longs instead for 'the bloodier stories, / Clang and clash of fight'. Graves's decision to cast a girl in this role results in a striking instance of gender reversal, whereby the conventional opposition between brutish boys and graceful girls is turned on its head. The shadow of the bedpost, meanwhile, 'waned with the spent candle' uttering only: "Good-night; Good-night"; a refrain that one again brings to mind Eliot and the haunting Shakespearean lines that conclude 'A Game of Chess' some four years later: 'Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, / good night'.²¹⁷ According to Graves, the conflict behind this early version of the poem is between 'the hope of love and peace, as symbolized by the child we were expecting, lying in bed and telling itself stories, and the fear of continued war as bound up in the stories themselves'.²¹⁸ He goes on to reveal that, just as 'the child... preferred to hear about horrible stories of war and bloodshed, so the world, and myself, too, if the call should come again, preferred to keep on at this ridiculous game of fighting'.²¹⁹ By viewing war as a childish 'game' that the poet and the world have not yet grown out of, Graves implicitly challenges the idea that battles and bloodshed are worthier or more 'grown-up' subjects than family life and domesticity. In this respect, his position could be seen as loosely anticipating the thrust of Virginia Woolf's oft-quoted observation in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): 'This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room.'²²⁰

After identifying the poem's central conflict, Graves elucidates (or, rather, complicates) a few of the mythical characters that populate its stanzas.

²¹⁷ Ibid. p.59.

²¹⁸ *PU*, p.105.

²¹⁹ Ibid. p.105.

²²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics: 1998), p.96.

‘Cro-bar-Cru,’ he explains, ‘represents a phrase from a poem about a wicked landlord evicting a hapless widow from a cottage with the help of his Crowbar Crew.’²²¹ Though Graves neglects to cite the name of the poem in which he first encountered this figure, he goes on to reveal that, as a child, he (presumably mistakenly) believed him to be a giant. In ‘Betsy,’ of course, Cro-bar-Cru is, somewhat confusingly, an ogre. The figure of Gog, meanwhile, is based, Graves claims, on ‘the Guildhall giant’ of the same name and is ‘mixed’ in the poet’s mind with the Old Testament giant Og²²² ‘who had the iron bedstead nine cubits long – note the bedstead association’.²²³ No explanation is provided, however, when it comes to the poem’s other characters: the Emperor and the Farmer, Ehud Vigo, Will, Abel and Ann Clarissa. Though the figure of Abel has obvious biblical overtones, his brother in this instance is not Cain but Will, a character whose name and journey to ‘the Witches’ Larder’ seems to be vaguely suggestive of Shakespeare and *Macbeth* as much as anything else. Returning to the conflict from which the poem sprang, Graves writes: ‘In this poem one part of me, the Jekyll, had intended to write a nursery poem for the child who was going to be born, and was refusing to think about anything else. The other, the Hyde, most interested in the preservation of life and love, was dominating the other with a commentary on the folly of war.’²²⁴ (106) On the conscious level, then, Graves was preoccupied with the apparently simple task of writing a nursery rhyme and nothing more – though the fact that he was ‘*refusing* to think about anything else [emphasis mine]’ suggests that this activity was a strategic rather than an innocent distraction. Unconsciously, it seems that a struggle was taking place between his desire to preserve ‘life and love’ on the one hand and his increasingly ambivalent attachment to the role of combatant and the ‘ridiculous game of fighting’ on the other.

In early 1921, a couple of years after completing work on ‘Betsy,’ Graves suddenly decided to rewrite the entire poem. His dissatisfaction with the original version was, he claims, due in part to the fact that his ‘poet-friends had been objecting to [his] preoccupation with “nursery sentimentalities”’. In

²²¹ *PU*, p.105.

²²² Deuteronomy 3:11.

²²³ *PU*, p.106.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 106.

'A First Review', the lyric that concludes *Country Sentiment*, Graves appears to highlight these objections through the character of Tom who addresses the poet thus: "Robert, have done with nursery pap, / Write like a man"²²⁵. Dominic Hibberd²²⁶ convincingly points out that the figure of Tom may well represent Siegfried Sassoon, who reprimanded Graves for not 'writing deeply'²²⁷ and producing sentimental verse that lacked 'guts'.²²⁸ Though Graves rejected these criticisms at first, insisting on his right to compose 'feather top rhymes' to counterbalance Sassoon's 'abysmal groanings',²²⁹ he had obviously taken them on board by the time he came to revise 'Betsy'. This eventual acquiescence was no doubt intimately bound up with Graves's *Pier-Glass* phase and his decision to 'stand up',²³⁰ with the help of Rivers, to the trauma of shellshock by writing poems that embraced rather than evaded neurosis and conflict. The re-evaluation of 'Betsy' would, presumably, have come at the tail end of this episode. Indeed, Graves goes on to provide a remarkably full account of the circumstances, both personal and political, surrounding the poem's revision:

This was at a time when it seemed that war was endless, Russia, Ireland, the Near East, were all embroiled, and the immediate cause was reading a paragraph in the paper about new poison gasses promised for the next war, and a rumour that a large house, quite close to where I was living, was to be converted into an experimental laboratory for making these. Since 1918 I had been deeply interested in Freudian psycho-analysis as being a possible corrective for my shellshock, which had just returned, and I was thinking of putting myself under treatment.²³¹

The second version of the poem was sparked off, then, by the critical influence of friends, the continuing threat of war, a newspaper article about the nearby manufacture of poison gasses, the return of the author's shellshock and the growing possibility of psychoanalytic treatment. This suggests a notably dense and contradictory historical context for the poem's secondary elaboration; a context far removed from the poem's apparent modality. Whereas 'Betsy' was

²²⁵ *CPI*, p.114.

²²⁶ Hibberd, 1990, p.527.

²²⁷ *SLI*, p.95.

²²⁸ *Ibid.* p.101.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* p.95.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* p.124.

²³¹ *PU*, p.106.

originally written (on the conscious level at least) with the sole intention of providing a pleasant nursery-rhyme for the poet's unborn child, the restyled poem resulted from a tangle of private and public concerns. Of all its various sources, it is significant that the article about poison gas is cited as the most 'immediate cause'. It seems ironic that something as everyday and prosaic as a newspaper story should instigate the revision of a poem that began life as a kind of fairytale. It also serves as a useful reminder that the enchanted settings of Graves's early poems are not always as otherworldly as they might seem. In July 1918 Graves had written to Sassoon describing his 'waking terror of poison gas, which', he confesses, 'is my most awful nightmare whenever I feel ill and think about the line'.²³² Given that it, reportedly, galvanised him into revisiting his old poem, Graves was obviously still very much in the grip of this fear in the early months of 1921.

Once the conditions of the poem's genesis have been established, Graves proceeds to quote the updated lyric in its entirety. The most immediately obvious amendment is the title itself, which is now 'The Bedpost' instead of 'Betsy,' signalling that the focus has moved, perhaps, from the war-hungry child to the war-haunted apparition that flickers upon her bedroom wall. (One might also note that 'The Bedpost' includes an anagram of 'Betsy' without the 'y'.) At eleven quatrains, rather than eight, 'The Bedpost' is also considerably longer than its predecessor, with none of the original stanzas left wholly unaltered. The meter and rhythm remain more or less the same, although there is more variation between trochaic and iambic lines in the second half of the revised poem, indicating, it could be argued, a greater degree of prosodic confidence on Graves's part. Rather than 'the shadow tall / Of her mother's wooden bedpost / Flung upon the wall' 'Sleepy Betsy' now sees 'the post and ball / Of her *sister's* wooden bedstead / Shadowed on the wall [emphasis mine]'. Similarly, the 'grave and kindly warrior' of the first poem becomes a 'grave young warrior standing / With uncovered head' in the new version. Once again the bedpost begins to tell its 'stories of old battles,' commencing with the Emperor and the Farmer 'fighting knee to knee'. On this occasion, however, it is revealed that the two warriors were given beds in the

²³² *SLI*, p.95.

‘sea-cavern’ of their defeated enemy, ‘the ruler of [the] shore,’ where they were promptly murdered by their host. The Emperor’s daughters ‘boldly’ dive beneath the waves, catching and killing the treacherous ruler who turns out to be none other than ‘Old Cro-bar-cru’ from the original poem. The Farmer’s ‘sturdy sons,’ meanwhile, once more defeat the giant Gog, throwing him again into ‘Stony Cataract / In the land of Og’. These ‘lusty brothers’ are revealed to be Will and Abel, about whom, the speaker knowingly proclaims, the bedpost ‘could tell ten thousand stories’. Instead of Ann Clarissa, this time it is the Emperor’s eldest daughter who falls in love with Will and, rather than retreating to the Witches’ Larder, they withdraw to ‘the Court of Venus’, indicating a shift, perhaps, of Shakespearean emphasis from *Macbeth* to *Venus and Adonis*. Gog’s aggrieved wife once again exacts her revenge upon Abel, stealing his ‘arms and helmet’ (as opposed to ‘armour’) and turning him into a post. The final two stanzas read:

As a post he shall be rooted
For yet many years,
Until a maiden shall release him
With a fall of tears.

But Betsy likes the bloodier stories,
Clang and clash of fight;
And Abel wanes with the spent candle,
“Sweetheart, good night!”²³³

Betsy, who still appears dissatisfied with the romantic turn of her interlocutor’s story, is clearly not, at this stage, the maiden to ‘release him / With a fall of tears;’ unless, of course, they are tears of frustration.

Before embarking on his analysis of the revised poem, Graves maintains that ‘a Freudian argument has suddenly changed the whole complexion of the piece while apparently preserving its original conflict’. To what extent the introduction of this ‘Freudian argument’ was a conscious decision on Graves’s part is left unclear. At the same time, however, he takes pains to spell out the fact that he is ‘no longer in sympathy with the sentiments

²³³ *PU*, pp.107-8.

or psychological tenets embodied in this poem'.²³⁴ With this caveat in mind, Graves's summarises his lyric in the following terms:

A child lies in bed and repeats stories told to her by an elder sister. In these stories there are two princesses identified by the sister with herself and Betsy, and two heroes who are their imaginary lovers. But Betsy in her own case rejects the sentimental lover given her and prefers to let him platonically tell her merely about battles, murders, and sudden death. The shadow of the bedpost is a sexual symbol which the child is not yet physically prepared to recognize, but when a certain time comes, Abel will be released from the spell.²³⁵

According to the above account, the reader must be able to glean an awful lot of information from the apparently innocuous image of Betsy's sister's 'wooden bedstead'. Regardless of whether or not we think the symbol is suggestive enough to support the elaborate 'back-story' that Graves describes, it nonetheless makes for an ingeniously worked-out associative thread. Rather like the frog that is transformed, via the attentions of a princess, into a handsome prince, Abel awaits the day when Betsy will view him as a lover rather than a platonic teller of tales. Only this will break the spell and grant him back his human form. On the psychoanalytic level, however, Abel is a phallic symbol that Betsy will apprehend with the onset of sexual maturity. His eventual release is dependent, then, upon a loss of innocence, albeit innocence of a particularly bloodthirsty kind.

Graves's first child, Jenny Nicholson (on whom the figure of Betsy was based), was born shortly after the Armistice. Graves reveals that, while writing the second version of the poem, he was 'very anxious on [Jenny's] behalf owing to a belief that her nervous system had been undermined, unknown to my wife and myself, by the neurotic condition of her nurse, who had also suffered greatly during the war; what future nervous disturbances might result to the little girl we did not dare to think'.²³⁶ Graves explains that he was seriously considering psychoanalysis as 'a possible relief' from both his growing fears over renewed war and his anxiety about the mental health of his daughter. There remained, however, 'a resistance in [his] mind against

²³⁴ Given his apparent distaste for the poem's Freudian tone, it is notable that Graves continued to include 'The Bedpost' in his canon, right up until *Collected Poems 1959*.

²³⁵ *PU*, p.108.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* pp.108-9.

being psycho-analysed'.²³⁷ Graves goes on to point out that 'The Bedpost' is 'scattered thick with very bold and definite sex-symbolism', adding: 'It will be seen that the conflict between my friends and myself (of which I spoke) was being reconciled in this piece, my nursery sentimentality balanced with its very opposite, the cynical Freudian view of childhood.'²³⁸ So the sex symbolism was added as a 'cynical' corrective to, what Graves and his friends regarded as, the sentimentalism of the earlier poem. Nevertheless, it should be added that, given her pre-sexual status and inability to recognise Abel as a phallic symbol, the figure of Betsy is hardly a straightforwardly Freudian child. According to Graves, his conscious aim during the composition of the second version was only to make the poem more of a unity by 'connecting up the disjointed parts of the story in a professional manner'.²³⁹ This was 'the interest dominant on the intellectual plane' or, as Graves puts it, the work of the 'Jekyll'. The 'Hyde,' meanwhile, was bound up with the poet's unconscious desire to seek out a psychoanalytic cure for his ongoing neuroses. Citing his reading of 'The Gnat' in *The Meaning of Dreams* as another example of this conflict, Graves claims that the Jekyll who was responsible for the manifest content of 'The Bedpost' resisted any suggestion of psychological treatment on the grounds that it would somehow interfere with the author's ability to write poetry. He then goes on to stage an intricate juxtaposition between the symbolism of 'The Bedpost' and that of 'Betsy':

...the child in this version, as I wish to make plain, emblemizes myself in one sense and an actual child in another, with Abel for psycho-therapy; and this imagery is superimposed on the former version where the child stands for the hope of a child and family life, on the one hand, and the for the European war-mind on the other, and where Abel is the spirit of peace and toleration, with a vague Christian colouring.²⁴⁰

There is an incredibly complicated superimposition going on here. Indeed, it anticipates a degree of classification as sophisticated as anything proposed by William Empson in *Seven Types and Some Versions of Pastoral*. Whereas the protagonist of 'Betsy' was a running-together of Graves's hope for peaceful

²³⁷ Ibid. p.109.

²³⁸ Ibid. p.109.

²³⁹ Ibid. p.109.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. pp.109-110.

domesticity on the one hand and his feelings of complicity with the bloodlust of contemporary Europe on the other, the child who features in 'The Bedpost' is a complex amalgam of the old Betsy, Graves's real-life daughter, Jenny, and a new conflict revolving around the poet's desire to seek treatment and his wish to continue writing. Similarly, in the first poem Abel is simply a quasi-Christian emblem of peace, a kind of unfinished cross (though the phallic implications are arguably already clear), whereas in the second, he takes on the guise of symbolic psychotherapist (just as the figure of the Minister does in Graves's reading of 'The Gnat'). Given the conflicts that can and do emerge between the tenets of Christianity and those of psychoanalysis, this transition is not wholly unproblematic; though Graves refrains from exploring the complications any further. Instead, he concludes his analysis with the following observation: 'Perhaps in secondary elaboration a structural repair has this difference from a surface repair, that the application of the imagery has been altered by the march of events, the changes are not merely a craftsman's variations within the existing symbolic structure.' Structural repair involves, then, the precarious act of updating or elaborating the poem's imagery in accordance with the author's more immediate circumstances. Later on, in *The Common Asphodel*, Graves announces that he no longer feels 'the frantic strain of swimming against the stream of time'²⁴¹. In *Poetic Unreason*, however, time is envisioned as a 'march of events'²⁴² with which the poet must keep up if he is to produce work of continuing originality. Though the image of a march has, perhaps eerily, militaristic overtones, Graves employs it in poems like 'The Feather Bed'²⁴³ and 'In Procession'²⁴⁴ to signify a more carnivalesque spectacle, suggesting chaotic profusion rather than strict uniformity.

Before moving on to look at the final part of this chapter, I would like to consider two roughly contemporaneous critical responses to Graves's

²⁴¹ *CA*, p.x.

²⁴² Interestingly, Graves uses the exact same phrase in the second part of *Poetic Unreason's* opening chapter, 'What is Bad Poetry,' to describe the peculiar distance that often exists between the poet and his or her own earlier work. *PU*, p.24.

²⁴³ 'Sacred Carnivals trundle through my mind, / With rhyme-compulsion mottoing each wagon.' *CPI*, p.190.

²⁴⁴ 'Carnival wagons / With their saints and their dragons / On the scroll of my teeming mind... / On and on, / In endless, variant procession'. *Ibid.* p.155.

reading of 'The Bedpost'. The first of these is by Douglas Day, who argues that

...the account of 'The Bedpost' represents a partial contradiction of [Graves's] statements throughout the body of *Poetic Unreason* that the only true poetry is that which comes into full being organically and unbidden. For, if this last were the case, then the original version of 'The Bedpost,' which Graves rejected as being an imperfect and unrealised account of his struggle, would be the 'true' poem; and the second version, which he favoured as being a more logically worked-out presentation, would be, because of its secondary elaboration on the psychological plane, one step further from being a 'true' poem. His Freudian applications tend toward an artificial, manufactured poetry, during the entire composition of which the rational, intellectual aspect of the poet's mind is in control; yet Graves says in this chapter that the creative process is not complete until the poet has written down his inspiration, organized it, and then come back to it again, to view it as a complete poetic experience – after which he is able to reorganize it so as to give it all the psychological significance it must possess if it is to have its desired effect.²⁴⁵

For Day, then, the account of 'The Bedpost' is in direct contradiction with the rest of *Poetic Unreason* because it espouses a cold-hearted, intellectual approach to composition, as opposed to the unconscious phenomenon of poetic inspiration that Graves champions elsewhere. There is no evidence, however, in Graves's commentary to suggest that 'The Bedpost' is the product of conscious design *alone*. At no point does the author categorically state that the poem was conceived (or rather re-conceived) without the aid of *unconscious* forces. According to Graves, he began work on the second version with the intention of 'making the poem more of a unity;' although he also reveals that, on the unconscious level, he wanted to express his desire to seek psychoanalytic treatment. In other words, the unconscious is as implicated in revision as it is in original composition, and the division between vision and revision is blurred in both. Furthermore, if we recall, Graves cites the newspaper report about the production of poison gas as being the 'most immediate cause' behind the lyric's composition. Given Graves's self-confessed pathological fear of this substance and its association in his mind with the prospect of renewed war, it hardly seems likely that he sat down to

²⁴⁵ Douglas Day, *Swifter than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p.75.

write his new poem in a state of clear-eyed composure. Even if this was the case, as Day suggests, it would not alter the fact that the original lyric was, as far as we can tell, composed in accordance with the author's theory of inspiration. In other words, if the first draft is born of genuine psychological conflict, no subsequent revision can diminish its underlying poetic value. Indeed, for Graves, any attempt to rework an earlier verse necessarily results in a reworking of the conflict from which it arose; it does not take the lyric, as Day argues, 'one step further from being a "true" poem'. In this respect, Day appears to be confusing Graves's position in *Poetic Unreason* with the one that he held in *On English Poetry*. Whereas the latter study dismisses the practice of revision as nothing more than corrective 'putty,' the former locates it at the very centre of the poet's art. Gravesians prove surprisingly resistant to Graves's early ventures into self-analysis and psycho-analytic poetics. The second critical response to Graves's account is by J. M. Cohen, whose argument hinges less on theoretical inconsistencies than on the effect of the analysis upon the poem itself:

In the chapter on Secondary Elaboration... [Graves] quotes his early poem 'The Bedpost' in two stages of composition, first as a piece of wayward nonsense, then as he rewrote it three years later after recognising the Freudian significance of its imagery. This recognition was no doubt of value to the poet. But the poem was as fanciful and inconsequent as before, though perhaps more deliberate in its fantasy. His explanation... merely obscures the poem. So long as the bedpost was a fanciful figure that told the child stories it was a charming invention. But once the poet began to attach deeper significances to it, he merely complicated the poem without making it more profound. Imagery that is transparent to the poet loses its efficacy.²⁴⁶

If Graves's explanation 'obscures' and 'complicates' the poem, as Cohen maintains, it is difficult to comprehend how it could possibly render the imagery 'transparent' to the poet or, for that matter, his readers. One comes away from Graves's gloss with a swarm of hermeneutic possibilities, rather than a complete solution to the puzzle. This does not, in itself, improve or weaken the effectiveness of the poem; it merely provides a forum, of sorts, for speculation. The reader may, of course, believe the first version to be superior

²⁴⁶ J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p.8-9

to the second, but it seems ill-founded to argue, as Cohen does, that any perceived difference in quality is attributable to Graves's post-poem analysis. The reading, in other words, cannot 'spoil' the lyric. Such objections are alarmingly reminiscent of the opposition that Graves faced from his anti-theoretical Georgian contemporaries in the years immediately following the War.

After completing his account of 'The Bedpost,' Graves quotes at length from an article that appeared in *The Queen* in which Edward Shanks²⁴⁷ sketches out 'a psychological problem' that has been brought to his attention by a poet friend. Without knowing why, the anonymous poet had resolved to write a poem on a particular subject in the sonnet form. After several months of trying fruitlessly to compose this lyric, he found himself writing, to his great satisfaction, a different poem altogether. The thrill of producing this new piece sent him back to his old project with renewed energy and, this time, 'the first eleven lines came bubbling out just as he would have had them'.²⁴⁸ After this initial burst of inspiration, however, the poet found himself struggling once more to come up with the final three lines. Suddenly it occurred to him that, rather than writing his sonnet in the Italian mode, he should be following the Elizabethan model. Following this realisation, he discarded his first draft and proceeded to write up a new poem in less than ten minutes. After revealing that the verse in question went on to become one of the poet's most successful pieces, Shanks asks 'Can you explain how that happened? I cannot, but I am sure that if I could it would provide me with the key to many mysteries. Mr. Graves is groping after that key.'²⁴⁹ Graves, meanwhile, responds to this challenge in the following terms: 'This particular lock only being described in vague terms, I cannot extemporize the exact key to fit it, but out of my bunch of skeletons I think I can produce something to coax it open, and the case will at any rate prove my willingness to meet critics of my theories on a ground of their own choice.'²⁵⁰ The idea that Graves has at his

²⁴⁷ Edward Shanks (1892-1953) was a poet and critic who also fought in the First World War. Though Graves describes him as a 'friend' in *Poetic Unreason*, in a letter to Edward Marsh dated 29 December 1917 he refers to him with less warmth as 'that ass Shanks' after reading an unfavourable review of *Georgian Poetry* that Shanks printed in the *New Statesman*. *SL1*, p.90.

²⁴⁸ *PU*, p.110.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p.111.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p.111.

disposal a 'bunch of skeletons' that will enable him to 'coax' open this particular poetic lock suggests that his approach is not so much an exact science as a kind of inspired guessing-game that, ultimately, yields the same results. Given the double meaning of 'skeletons' (and the word's associative link to the author's name), it is tempting to read Graves's 'bunch of skeletons' as a bunch of past selves; a macabre metaphor for the various accumulated experiences to which the poet has recourse when tackling poetic conundrums. Moreover, since the word brings to mind the figure of John Skelton, Graves's chief poetic influence, it also seems possible to view these 'skeletons' as literary forebears whose lives and works provide possible answers to otherwise unsolvable problems. Either way, it is wonderfully apt that Graves should be in possession of, potentially, so many skeletons, particularly in the light of his penchant for x-raying poems.

Plunging into his reply to Shanks, Graves proposes that the poet 'became aware of a nucleus, a group of words embodying some phase of a conflict with which he was at the time concerned, and which suggested the outline of a poem'.²⁵¹ He chose the sonnet form, Graves argues, because the group of words probably 'had a rhythm capable of subordination to the familiar five-stress lines; and because further this group of words was in some way concerned with the idea contained in some already existing sonnet'.²⁵² So, in Graves's view, a phrase or couplet swam, unbidden, into the poet's mind that seemed to express the essence of a conflict with which he was, consciously or unconsciously, preoccupied. According to Graves, not only did these lines probably carry the metrical suggestion of a sonnet, they also may well have resembled, thematically, a pre-existing sonnet that the poet had already encountered at some earlier stage. These possible similarities, Graves suggests, would have made the choice of form a foregone conclusion; as would the author's desire to demonstrate 'his capacity not yet proved to his own satisfaction for writing in a meter distinguished by the performances of Milton, Keats, and other great ones'.²⁵³ For Graves, it seems, as much as Harold Bloom or even T. S. Eliot, the poet never writes alone, but is always in

²⁵¹ Ibid. p.111.

²⁵² Ibid. p.111.

²⁵³ Ibid. p.111. It is striking that Milton is still, at this stage of Graves's development, considered to be among the 'great ones' of English poetry.

dialogue with a motley crew of skeletal predecessors. As much as anything else, this last observation could be construed as a veiled admission on Graves's part that he too longed to be among the English poets (although it should be noted that he hadn't written many sonnets by this stage); a desire that he would later outwardly deny.²⁵⁴ Graves moves on to argue that Shanks's anonymous poet was unable to progress from the 'nucleus' of his poem's inception because 'a further element was lacking to fill in the bare outline of the conflict'.²⁵⁵ As an instance of incomplete inspiration, this scenario brings to mind Coleridge's inability to recapture the vision that gave rise to 'Kubla Khan' after he was interrupted by the person from Porlock. Though, of course, in the case of Shanks's poet-friend, no such external interruption is mentioned.

After several months, we recall, the poet produced a lyric entirely separate to the sonnet which had long been eluding his grasp. 'That he was pleased and excited about it,' Graves points out, 'seems to indicate that it represented at any rate a temporary solution of a long-standing and painful conflict'.²⁵⁶ This solution, Graves maintains, 'supplied the necessary element for completing the sonnet', prompting the poet to return to his earlier draft. For reasons of clarity, Graves's account of what he believed happened next is worth quoting at length:

...the previous structure of the idea had been built up with an intricate system of rhymes. The poet's mind, which still clung to the idea of the Italian sonnet, was loth to abandon this scheme of rhymes, yet these rhymes, being key-words full of association, committed the poem to a structure which allowed the new element no scope. By a certain amount of adjustment eleven lines could be written, but the necessary balance of the octave and sestet, which is one of the important demands of the sonnet form, was deranged.²⁵⁷

So, in Graves's mind, the poet came back to his previous attempt with the intention of introducing the missing element revealed to him in the lyric he had just completed. Unfortunately the existing sonnet, with its 'intricate system of rhymes' and 'key-words full of association,'²⁵⁸ proved

²⁵⁴ We recall Graves's keen awareness of Keats's poetic ambition in the reading of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' that appears in *The Meaning of Dreams*. MOD, p.143.

²⁵⁵ *PU*, pp.111-112.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p.112.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.112.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p.112.

unaccommodating to this new material. While Graves's hypothetical poet could wrestle these fresh ideas into the first eleven lines, he struggled to finish the poem without causing major distortion to the overall design. 'Here was a deadlock,' Graves argues, between the author's wish 'to write in the sonnet form used by Milton and Keats' and his desire to 'express and solve the conflict in the light of [his] new knowledge, without regard to sonnet forms'.²⁵⁹ Graves is a brilliant critic at such moments and, what is more, a recognisably *modern* one. It was at this moment of paralysis, he goes on to suggest, that the poet came up with the idea of using the Elizabethan sonnet, partly because 'Shakespeare and Coleridge were as good any day as Milton and Keats' and partly because 'This form [is] not nearly so insistent in its demand for rhymes'.²⁶⁰

Once he has put forward his interpretation of what took place in the mind of Shanks's poet-friend, Graves comes back to the subject of structure and, in particular, its relation to existing poetic models:

The structural competence of any poem is not, as is usually thought, due to deliberate consideration of the needs of the particular subject at the time of writing, but on the poet's preoccupation, during the period of conflict closed by the writing of the poem, with the structure of poetry already existing, which has a definite relation in content to that conflict. Structure and content cannot be separated facily as the custom now is to separate them, because such separation implies the preference of one interest to the other, and the denial to the poem of its character as a harmonized individual.²⁶¹

Far from writing in romantic isolation, then, the poet is engaged in a complicated act of literary collaboration as he works out his structure in relation to those poems that, to his mind, issue forth from comparable psychological conflicts. This process of aesthetic exchange presumably entails negotiating a difficult path between imitation and resistance, absorption and rebuttal. Graves maintains that structural concerns are not the product of 'deliberate consideration' so much as a 'preoccupation' that takes place '*during* the period of conflict closed by the writing of the poem [emphasis mine]'. Though it is hard to draw definite conclusions from Graves's typically

²⁵⁹ Ibid. p.112

²⁶⁰ Ibid. pp.112-113.

²⁶¹ Ibid. p.113.

elusive account, the fact that this dialogue between the poet and his exemplars goes on in ‘the period of conflict’ suggests that it may not be an entirely conscious procedure. This seems to be born out in Graves’s contention that ‘Structure and content cannot be separated’. In other words, just as every surface correction has structural implications for the rest of the lyric, so too does the poet’s choice of subject matter; particularly in the light of other, thematically similar poems. Graves’s theoretical dissolution of the surface-structure opposition brings with it a blurring of the distinction between conscious and unconscious modes of composition; a distinction that played a crucial role in the argument of *On English Poetry*: ‘I now regard the process of composition as the end of a long chapter of experience. Where several drafts are made these show new phases in the progress of the same idea, and we can no longer speak of the conscious or critical mind and the unconscious or creative mind.’²⁶² Though Graves would later abandon the theories that underpin this credo, he remained famously steadfast in his commitment to the act of revision, revisiting and refashioning poems throughout the duration of his writing life.

V. ‘WHAT IS BAD POETRY?’: CANONS AND COMMUNICATION

In his opening chapter to *Poetic Unreason*, Graves argues that the question ‘what is bad poetry?’ has become virtually meaningless. Instead of offering a ‘formula’ for good or bad poetry, then, Graves concludes the first part of his chapter by drawing our attention to the mutable nature of literary standards and their subsequent unreliability in discussions of this kind. While one age prizes one set of aesthetic criteria, another age sets store by its polar opposite. In Graves’s view these shifting value-judgements often tell us as much (if not more) about a particular historical period as they do about the innate goodness or badness of a particular work of art: ‘My suggestion is that

²⁶² Ibid.113.

these criteria are not accidental or foreseeable; they represent a need on the part of the critics for poetry that will repair certain deficiencies or maintain certain successes not only in the poetry of the past, but also in the social, religious and scholastic conditions at the time obtaining.²⁶³ Using the poetry of the Great War as an example, Graves describes the shift in favour from the idealistic, patriotic verse of figures like Rupert Brooke in the first years of the conflict, to the disillusioned sentiment of Siegfried Sassoon and the escapist, child-like lyrics of the later Georgian poets. Such a dramatic sea-change in literary taste is a clear indication, Graves argues, that ‘the national aesthetic canons of good and bad, corresponded closely with, and were no more stationary than national political sentiment’.²⁶⁴ As for the current situation, Graves draws up a map that separates out ‘the poets of scepticism and cynicism’ on the one hand (Hardy, Housman, Huxley and Eliot) and ‘the poets of temporary escape’ on the other (de la Mare, Blunden, the later Masefield and the middle Yeats), from which the canon will select its exemplars. This rudimentary account of modern poetry will be significantly developed and politicised in his next short volume, *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry*. Graves himself, of course, seems to swing conspicuously between both camps at this time, carefully avoiding allegiance to either. Indeed, Fran Brearton has pointed out that, compared to the *The White Goddess*, *Poetic Unreason* ‘does not prove liberating for Graves because it has its sights too firmly fixed on those political camps, particularly the ones which might exert the strongest claims on him, or misrepresent his work’.²⁶⁵ It seems to me, however, that far from impeding his poetic development, Graves’s self-consciousness about his own position on the literary-political spectrum of the early 1920s enabled him to engage with a range of poets and poetry that would only shrink over the course of the ensuing years.

Indeed, the second section of *Poetic Unreason*’s opening chapter begins with an attack on the kind of narrow literary standards that Graves himself would later exercise in his post-Goddess phase. Here, however, he makes a case for inclusiveness and catholicity, arguing that ‘There is no form

²⁶³ Ibid, p.18.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. p.19.

²⁶⁵ Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.93.

poetry can take unworthy of our consideration, even our admiration.²⁶⁶ In order to prove this theory, Graves defends the nonsense verse of Edward Lear against charges of meaninglessness and frivolity by suggesting that it is often the product of a 'very painful emotional upset in the poet's mind'.²⁶⁷

According to Graves, the poem 'Calico Pie', for example, presents adult grief in the form of childish invention; a strategy which, he believes, 'denote[s] suffering in an extreme form'.²⁶⁸ Such a reading looks ahead to T. S. Eliot's penetrating description of Lear's verse in *The Music of Poetry* (1942) as a variety of 'blues'.²⁶⁹ Although Walter de la Mare's work is cited as a modern equivalent to Lear's, it is difficult not to think of Graves's own early predilection for writing nursery rhymes, nonsense verse and other seemingly 'childish' lyrics under the strain of ongoing neurasthenia. When Graves describes the birds that fly away from the speaker of 'Calico Pie' as a 'familiar emblem of unrealized love'²⁷⁰ we are inevitably reminded of one of his own most famous poems, the deeply moving 'Love without Hope,' which first appeared in *Welchman's Hose* (1925) in the same year as *Poetic Unreason*:

Love without hope, as when the young bird-catcher
Swept off his tall hat to the Squire's own daughter,
So let the imprisoned larks escape and fly
Singing about her head, as she rode by.²⁷¹

Later on, in the similarly epigrammatic lyric 'A Plea to Boys and Girls' (1956), Graves would once again align himself (though in a much more overt way) with the figure of Lear, whose poems are placed in opposition to Pope's *Iliad* as a body of work which is necessarily learned 'by heart, not wrote'.²⁷² In this verse, the speaker seems to desire the same ambivalent literary fate as the Edward Lear celebrated by W. H. Auden in his eponymous 1930s poem; a man to whom 'the children swarmed... like settlers'²⁷³ even as the birds flew away. The Lear of Auden's poem is very much in line with the tortured

²⁶⁶ *PU*, p.22.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p.22.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.23.

²⁶⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p.56.

²⁷⁰ *PU*, p.23.

²⁷¹ *CPI*, p.260.

²⁷² *CP2*, p.246.

²⁷³ Auden, *Collected Poems*, p.183.

comedian that Graves envisions in *Poetic Unreason*: ‘he wept to himself in the night, / A dirty landscape-painter who hated his nose’.²⁷⁴ This last reference to the unhappy poet’s nose obviously brings to mind the protagonist of Lear’s ‘Dong with a Luminous Nose’, a character whom Graves describes as ‘the poet himself with the pantomime mask over a tear-stained face... as tragic a figure as Cadmus of the Greek legend seeking his lost Europa, even a more painful one’.²⁷⁵ Ever-alert to what’s in a name, Graves compares Lear’s tragic-playfulness to that of another ‘crazy old Englishman’ by asking the question: ‘who will say that the foolery in Edward Lear is less worthy of our tragic imagination than the terrible foolery at the crisis of King Lear?’.²⁷⁶ By emphasising the underlying seriousness and meaningfulness of ‘nonsense’ lyrics like Lear’s, Graves anticipates Auden’s introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1938) and the case he puts forward for a poetry that is ‘at the same time light and adult’.²⁷⁷ As one of the first major practitioners of the ostensibly minor genre of light-verse in the twentieth century, Graves himself provided writers like Auden and Ransom with a much-needed antidote to the apocalyptic high-seriousness of much modernist poetry.

Returning again to the question he posed in the chapter’s title, Graves posits that, for many critics, bad poetry could well be defined as “‘Yours, when I do not understand you and when your work has no help to offer me in my troubles’”.²⁷⁸ Graves argues that this narrow and intolerant approach to verse stems largely from the ‘confusion’ that surrounds the two aspects of poetry that he identified at the beginning of the chapter: ‘Poetry as it fulfils certain needs in the poet, and Poetry as it fulfils certain needs in the reader’. In Graves’s view, critics and readers in general go wrong when they make assumptions about the ‘communicative’ function of the poet. I. A. Richards makes a similar point in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, which was published roughly contemporaneously with *Poetic Unreason*: ‘In the course of his work [the poet] is not as a rule deliberately and consciously engaged in a

²⁷⁴ Ibid. p.182.

²⁷⁵ *PU*, pp.23-24.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. p.24.

²⁷⁷ Auden, *The English Auden*, p.368.

²⁷⁸ *PU*, p.22.

communicative endeavour'²⁷⁹ (though it is worth remembering that this observation is made in a chapter that also contains severe criticism of Graves's earlier reading of 'Kubla Khan' and his general propensity for exploring 'the mental processes of the poet').²⁸⁰ In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot makes a similar point: 'If poetry is a form of "communication", yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it.'²⁸¹ According to Graves, 'poetry of an emotional character' is seldom ever written with an audience in mind beyond the poet's own conflicted self (or selves):

But this seems to me the important point, that this act of composition is primarily not communication between the individual poet and his neighbours, but an inter-communication of the different selves formed within the individual in relation to the various groups with which he has come into contact.²⁸²

As a result, the poet's first draft is often as cryptic and as private as a newly-remembered dream. It is only after a period of what Graves calls 'secondary or tertiary elaboration' that the text becomes meaningful for a 'limited group' of like-minded readers.

Given the deeply personal nature of the poem, Graves irritably challenges the 'right' of reviewers 'to tax a poet with carelessness, obscurity, pedantry, dullness, immorality, or any other similar failing where the interests which the poet has shown... are not represented in the experience of the reviewer'. To put it another way: how can a critic possibly judge the value of a poem if he or she does not recognise the emotional experience with which it is concerned? In these circumstances, Graves argues that a reviewer can only provide a descriptive account of the work, as any kind of evaluative commentary would be necessarily dishonest. Such a view flies in the face of Richards's observation, again in *Principles*, that 'The critic cannot possibly avoid using some ideas about value.'²⁸³ It also resembles what Eliot describes as the second, or adolescent, phase of poetry appreciation in his note to the

²⁷⁹ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p.26.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. p.29.

²⁸¹ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p.30.

²⁸² *PU*, p.27.

²⁸³ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p.35.

first chapter of *The Use of Poetry*, whereby the ‘the poem, or the poetry of a single poet, invades the youthful consciousness and assumes complete possession for a time’.²⁸⁴ According to Eliot’s theory, Graves is confusing the reader’s mature ability to distinguish between ‘degrees of greatness’ (an almost taboo word in the Gravesian vocabulary) and the more rudimentary skill of distinguishing between ‘the genuine and the sham’.²⁸⁵ Graves, of course, would insist that we cannot know whether a poem is a ‘sham’ or not, since it is always potentially ‘genuine’ in the eyes of another reader (though he would later make this distinction the sole basis of his criticism). All we can do, from this standpoint, is hold fast to the innate standards dictated by our individual ‘contexts’:

While insisting that in an absolute sense all poetry is of equal value, I admit that it would be a counsel of perfection, an absurdity to say that a reader ought equally to value any two poems he cares to mention, of which one is of far deeper appeal to him than the other. We cannot escape from our context to form a common life with people or poems beyond the limits of this context.²⁸⁶

Many, of course, would argue that one of the crucial functions of art is to liberate us from the confines of our respective contexts, not to bury us more deeply within them. For Graves, however, the act of appreciating and, to a certain extent, even understanding a poem depends entirely on the particulars of the reader’s own emotional history.

Graves’s embattled position is clearly that of a poet who has been stung more than once by the literary press. In *Goodbye to All That*, for example, he confesses that ‘*Country Sentiment* was hardly noticed; the *Pier-Glass* was also a failure’, adding: ‘In these days I used to take the reviews of my poetry-books seriously.’²⁸⁷ It seems natural, then, given the rough treatment of Graves’s own early work at the hands of the critics, that he should adopt this rather defensive posture. Indeed, it leads him to divide poetry at any one time into three basic types: that which is popular, that which is unpopular but ahead of its time (and therefore soon to be popular) and that which is

²⁸⁴ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p.34.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.34.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.* pp.42-43.

²⁸⁷ *GTAT(29)*, p.287.

unpopular but championed by a conservative minority for its staunch traditionalism. Even if ‘a strange poem occurs’ that is universally dismissed on every possible ground, ‘it is always possible that this poem if it survives will appear to future historians as a remarkable piece of art’.²⁸⁸ Although he refrained from adopting Graves’s more extreme relativistic principles, Auden employed a similar tactic in ‘Poetry, Poets, and Taste’ (1936), arguing that ‘Every reader and every age think naturally enough that they have the key to absolute taste, but history should make us humble.’²⁸⁹ In order to ‘examine more closely this question of group-appeal’, Graves turns his attention to a short nursery rhyme that has been praised by the likes of Robert Louis Stevenson and Walter de la Mere among others ‘as being the true stuff of poetry’. It reads:

How many miles to Babylon?
Threescore miles and ten.
Can I get there by candle-light?
Yes, and back again.²⁹⁰

Intrigued by the general inability among readers to pinpoint exactly where the poem’s widely acknowledged merit lies, Graves constructs a dialogue on the subject which is based, we are told, on actual conversations that took place with a number of his friends.

The discussion begins with Graves’s recollection that the first version of the poem he encountered ran: ‘How many miles to Babyland? / Threescore miles and ten, etc.’ His composite-friend, meanwhile, complains that the substitution of Babylon for Babyland ‘ruins the poem’.²⁹¹ Graves responds by posing the question: ‘what does Babylon mean that Babyland does not mean? Is Babylon a mere Timbuctoo, or is it something more?’²⁹² According to Graves’s interlocutor, Babylon has a range of portentous biblical connotations suggesting, as Babyland does not, ‘a wicked power constantly coaxing and threatening the chosen people to destruction’.²⁹³ This answer leads Graves to ask whether the poem juxtaposes childhood innocence, symbolised by

²⁸⁸ *PU*, p.30.

²⁸⁹ Auden, *The English Auden*, p.360.

²⁹⁰ *PU*, p.30.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.* p.31.

²⁹² *Ibid.* p.31.

²⁹³ *Ibid.* p.32.

‘candlelight’, with the worldly corruption of Babylon. He is reminded by his friend, however, that candlelight, in the ecclesiastical tradition, also represents ‘loyalty and faith’. With this in mind, Graves proposes ‘a tentative analysis of the effect produced in you by the poem’:

It is a dialogue, the man who has gone astray after the lusts of the flesh and the sophistications of the world, addressing a child who lies innocently in bed. When the child asks the question, the man feels that, in spite of the child’s apparent helplessness and his ignorance of the determinate side of life, he himself, with all his strength and worldly wisdom, is far inferior in power to the child.²⁹⁴

While the anonymous friend goes along with this rather Blakean reading of the poem, he is uncertain about Graves’s references to ‘sophistication’ and the ‘determinate side of life’. Instead of addressing this reservation directly, Graves asks whether it would make any difference to the poem if he were to replace the ‘Threescore miles and ten’ of the second line with, say, ‘Fourscore miles and six’. This rhetorical question serves to remind his friend of Psalms 90:10 and its proclamation: ‘The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.’ In this light, ‘threescore miles and ten’ alludes to the average human lifespan of seventy years, as dictated by the Psalmist.

Graves goes on to attribute the poem’s final line (‘Yes, and back again’) to ‘The remnant’s return with all its disillusion and despondency’, adding ‘My mind rides with Ezra around the circuit of the soul’s Jerusalem and finds all in ruins.’²⁹⁵ This disarmingly personal identification with the figure of Ezra reminds us that Graves himself was a ‘remnant’ of the First World War, returning to face similar tasks of spiritual and social ‘reconstruction’. Indeed, it is possible to read Graves’s summary of the poem’s message as a hopeful vision of his own post-war recovery: “Keep innocency,” it preaches, “and you can pass through the Babylon of manhood, and return safe and sound with as much ease as in childhood you visited that magnificent city of your dreams and came back before the candle had burned

²⁹⁴ Ibid. p.32.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. p.33.

to its socket.” Citing the Psalmist’s warning about the ‘labour and sorrow’ of old age, Graves’s friend reminds him that, just as few reach fourscore years, only a handful make it back from Babylon and ‘both are confronted with the hopeless task of repairing a lifetime’s damage to their spiritual senses’.²⁹⁶ For Graves, the close ‘interaction’ between the poem’s various biblical allusions (‘Babylon’, ‘candlelight’, ‘threescore and ten’) proves that ‘Babylon’ was probably the original version and ‘Babyland’ a later nursery-rhyme mutation. His friend agrees, pointing out that ‘Nursery rhymes and fables are the detritus beds of very ancient history and thought.’²⁹⁷ He then asks whether the poem is likely to ‘strike the same chords’ among Christian readers; to which Graves replies:

Not quite. As there are degrees of implication, so there are degrees of perception. There is a common core of experience, certainly, but each individual has, for instance, different personal associations with candlelight, which alter the force of the conflict, whether the candle is thought of more particularly as a friendly charm against darkness, or whether the aspect of the short flickering life of the candle may associate itself more nearly with the threescore and ten idea.²⁹⁸

This account of the essential uniqueness of each reader’s perception concludes the dialogue. Graves then goes on to describe how he further tested out the poem’s ‘group-appeal’ by asking an ‘Indian friend’ what it meant to him. According to Graves, ‘He replied that it meant nothing much, and admitted that Babylon to him was no more than a Persepolis or a Timbuctoo, that threescore and ten was merely an archaic seventy and that “back again” was just home to bed.’²⁹⁹ Graves attributes this lack of significance to the fact that his friend was not a Christian and had been brought up on the sacred literature of his own country. Having said this, Graves also discovered that, despite the differences in their respective cultural backgrounds, he and his friend did in fact share an understanding of ‘a few score symbols’.

Taking what appears to be a Jungian perspective, Graves argues that these common symbols appear again and again in dreams without much variation between individuals. He illustrates this idea by providing a catalogue

²⁹⁶ Ibid. p.33.

²⁹⁷ Ibid. p.33.

²⁹⁸ Ibid. p.34.

²⁹⁹ Ibid. p.34.

of poetic emblems and associations (including the garden, the snake, the sea, the colours black and white, the tree, and so on) that, in his view, suggest a degree of psychological continuity between different nationalities and historical periods. These archetypal recurrences, however, seem to be the exception rather than the rule, since Graves insists that ‘A truly universal poem... would be impossible, differences of environment having set such bounds between the races and colours, that even such simple symbols as we have in common with the Hindus are unintelligible to Congo pigmy and Eskimo’.³⁰⁰ As a result, Graves concludes that, contrary to what the publishers say, width of appeal is not the determining factor in considerations of aesthetic value. Instead, he argues that ‘the goodness of a poem is... a relative quality dependent... on the degree of perception by the reader for the various phases of experience reconciled in terms of each other by the poet’.³⁰¹ It follows that, unless a reader possesses some measure of this experiential ‘perception’ in relation to the poem, he or she is ultimately in no position to judge its literary merit. This brings Graves back to the matter of his Indian friend and the ‘Babylon’ poem: ‘my Indian friend cannot say *Babylon* is a bad rhyme because it means nothing to him, or claim that he can get very far by studying it, as people say, “emotionally for the beauty the verse”; where there is no contact there can be no criticism’.³⁰² A substantial connection must take place between the reader and the poem if any kind of value judgement is to be made; although the existence of such a connection will usually make the nature of that judgement a foregone conclusion (hence the absence of ‘bad poetry’ in Graves’s critical utopia). The intensity of this connection, or ‘contact’, will determine the depth of the reader’s interpretation and his or her ability to arrive at the outer (or rather inner) reaches of the poem’s meaning. William Empson would later echo this view in his preface to the second edition of *Seven Types*: ‘You think the poem is worth the trouble before you choose to go into it carefully, and you know more about what it is worth when you have done so.’³⁰³ A poem’s ‘worth’ is measured not so much by its popularity,

³⁰⁰ Ibid. p.36.

³⁰¹ Ibid. p.36.

³⁰² Ibid. p.37.

³⁰³ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p.xiii.

then, as by its capacity to support a number of increasingly complex readings at the hands of a limited audience who feel a strong identification with it:

My conclusion then is that, though from the reader's point of view one of our few criteria of what constitutes good poetry is the width of appeal; this width must be qualified by depth. An ideal poem in such a given age would be like a Chinese nest of boxes, one inside the other, with the outer meaning recognizable by everyone, in a very large group, the next one by almost every one, and as each of these phases of experience is apprehended, a new one constantly appearing of more and more particular application, the group to which it appeals growing smaller and smaller like the boxes.³⁰⁴

Graves's poetic ideal reminds us of his own predilection for writing Chinese-box poems like 'Warning to Children', which first appeared in April 1929. The hierarchical nature of Graves's reader-reception theory seems to align him with the modernists, who also catered to a reduced audience of initiates. Unlike Pound and Eliot, however, Graves's select readership is based on shared experience and emotional makeup, rather than a high level of cultural sophistication or esoteric learning. As we have seen in his readings of lyrics like 'La Belle Dame', Graves values poems that demonstrate a disarming combination of surface-simplicity and subterranean-complexity.

According to Graves, just as in 'primitive' cultures 'the devil of each tribe is generally the god of their most powerful enemy',³⁰⁵ so in the history of literary criticism each period is a direct reaction against the dominant mode of the preceding phase:

...if the Eighteenth Century rode the ideal of *decorum* to death, it was a protest against the devil of Excess, the sensual excess of the Restoration wits on the one hand and the self-mortifying violence of the Puritans on the other. Decorum in politics, manners, religions and literature alike was in the reign of Queen Anne an undeniable necessity. When Decorum was outlasting its inevitability came the Romantic Revival to set up a new God of Freedom and make Decorum into the Devil of Tyranny and Dullness.³⁰⁶

In Graves's view this process teaches us that our self-fashioned gods and devils are only ever temporary and, though we are compelled to re-make them

³⁰⁴ *PU*, pp.41-2.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p.43.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p. 43-4.

every day, ‘the best policy appears to be that of admitting our gods to be only of local power, and of respecting the devils as being similarly local and fulfilling a definite need for their subjects’.³⁰⁷ Graves illustrates this point by providing a picaresque, whistle-stop tour of Shakespeare’s critical reception down the ages:

In this relative sense even the more emotional plays of Shakespeare were baddish poetry at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and again when Voltaire had his vogue in England; the sonnets were a disgrace. Then the eighteenth century passed and Shakespeare was restored by the nineteenth in undiminished glory for all his eclipse. But it was a Shakespeare of a very different kind who was restored, not the popular dramatist of the reigns of Elizabeth and James, but first as a Romantic Revivalist, and then as a grave literary moralist of the company of Emerson, Dean Farrar and Matthew Arnold: and the Shakespeare of this new and racketsy century is already showing some unsuspected and (to the Victorians) disagreeable traits.³⁰⁸

In this schema, there are as many Shakespeares as there are readers. But if Graves’s model warns against the folly of viewing authors through the mutable lens of contemporary opinion, it also, inadvertently perhaps, suggests the near-impossibility of not doing so. In this respect, Graves points out that ‘the literary critic has a good deal to learn from his enemy the scientist who finds a generic beauty everywhere’.³⁰⁹ Like the good scientist, the good critic should challenge his own preconceptions (even as he uses them) viewing each poem as a potentially meaningful work of art. This comment also indirectly anticipates the general move that took place in literary studies during the 1920s towards a more scientifically rigorous approach to the business of textual analysis. Graves ends the chapter by renewing his plea for tolerance among literary critics: ‘Perfect adaptability to any context, irresistible omnivorousness of reading, bringing with them universal toleration and omniscience, these are magnificent counsels of perfection.’³¹⁰ As a statement against partisanship and absolutism in matters of literary taste, *Poetic Unreason* clearly goes against the manifesto-driven climate of modernism, even as it adopts some of its more polemical mannerisms.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. p.44.

³⁰⁸ Ibid. p.45.

³⁰⁹ Ibid. p.47.

³¹⁰ Ibid. p.48.

CONCLUSION

In keeping with what remains arguably his most famous line of verse: ‘There is one story and one story only’, Graves is generally read according to the story that he tells about himself in works like (the revised edition of) *Goodbye to All That* (1957) and *The White Goddess*. In this grand narrative two overlapping versions of Graves emerge: the young soldier poet who fought in the First World War alongside Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon and the mature, self-styled ‘muse-poet’ whose war experience finds oblique expression in the form of an elaborately worked-out personal mythology. In this thesis I have attempted to tell one of the stories that didn’t make it into the final cut of Graves’s carefully constructed autobiography. It is a story that takes place in the years immediately following the War, when Graves returned home to face personal breakdown, public indifference and the political instability of post-War Europe. Despite, or rather, because of these strenuous conditions, the period spanning from Graves’s demobilization in 1919 to his departure for Cairo with Laura Riding in 1926 remains one of the most prolific and intellectually intense phases of his career. As a ‘precursor’ to the more biographically sensational years of the Riding relationship and, later still, the White Goddess myth, it also remains one of the least discussed. Although he would later shun modernity in favour of an existence beyond ‘the stream of time’, in the early 1920s Graves produced a body of prose that drew freely on contemporary developments in psychoanalysis, anthropology and literary criticism. In these works Graves emerges as a poet-critic caught between the orthodoxies of his late Georgian background and the radicalism of the modernist experiment, negotiating a pathway that would later prove to be uniquely enabling for a new generation of post-modern poets, including John Crowe Ransom, William Empson, W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice.

Perhaps more so than any of his other works, *The White Goddess* reveals Graves’s deep familiarity and intellectual involvement with James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. It is worth remembering, however, that Graves’s

relationship with this seminal text was initiated by the British psychologist W. H. R. Rivers some thirty years before the publication of the former's 'historical grammar of poetic myth'. Indeed, *On English Poetry* and *Poetic Unreason* are both littered with traces of Graves's immersion in Frazerian anthropology; from casual references to witchdoctors, cleansing rites and oracles to the sceptical, quasi-scientific attitude that generally permeates his arguments about 'homeopathic' poetry and 'control by spirits'. This early investment in the ideas and methodology of *The Golden Bough* places Graves in the company of quintessentially modern figures like Yeats, Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, all of whom drew deeply from Frazer's masterwork. Along with anthropology, Rivers was also responsible for Graves's introduction to the new psychological theories that were sweeping English intellectual life in the years following the War. Although Graves later denied ever coming under the influence of Freud, his early criticism shows him to be, along with Herbert Read, one of the first British poets to draw directly on psychoanalytic theory. Not only does Graves incorporate Freudian ideas into his poetic thought, he also pioneers the application of psychoanalytic techniques to the interpretation of literary texts. Along with received classics like 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and 'Kubla Khan', Graves analyses a number of his own early lyrics using Freud's case histories as a literary model. The result is a remarkably revealing account of a practicing poet's creative process, written in the spirit of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition'. In this respect, Graves's first forays into criticism continue to provide us with new ways of reading a major twentieth-century poet and new ways of thinking about poetic production in general.

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