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"THE YET UNSAYABLE":  
THE LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE  
IN THE POETRY OF  
ROBERT GRAVES

by

Paul Malott

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
March, 1993

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by Paul Edwin Malott

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dated MARCH 12, 1993

External Examiner \_\_\_\_\_

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For Kelly

"The heart I want, so strong  
That it can bear  
To love itself, loves you."

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## Abstract

Robert Graves's poetry is more often valued for its lyric gracefulness than for its intellectual cogency. Since he did not explore the more flamboyant free-verse techniques and broadly speculative themes popular with his major contemporaries, his poetry has rarely been given the close attention it deserves. His poems give sharp attention to the competing claims of the will, emotions and intellect. Many of them are insistent upon the difficulty involved in truly knowing anything; and more importantly, they confirm the value which inheres in deeply experiencing the processes of doubt. They display the siftings of half-knowledge and conjecture as well as the weighing of counter-arguments which Graves often views as a necessary prerequisite to establishing the validity of what one knows.

Graves's poetic interest in the need for self-mastery intensified during his association with the American poet, Laura Riding. Both her determination to curtail any emotional posturing in her verse and her profound distrust of the body had considerable influence on Graves's stylistic and thematic development. How to persevere when burdened with a heightened sensitivity to the limitations of human knowledge became an unremitting challenge for Graves during his years with Riding.

The spirited assertiveness which characterized many of his most successful poems later deteriorates into a somewhat formulaic and egotistical self-assurance. His worship of the mortal incarnations of the White Goddess and his at times blunt avowals of intuitive certainty weaken many of his poems written after 1950. This decline in the latter half of Graves's career should not blind us to the skill exercised in his best poetry for finding both wonder and at least provisional certainty amidst the ever-renewing occasions for confusion and doubt.

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I would like to thank Robert Bertholf of the State University of New York and William Graves for their kind permission to quote from the Robert Graves manuscript collection in the Lockwood Memorial Library in Buffalo.

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All generalizations are stupid.

Michael O'Neil,  
my brother-in-law

## Preface

Compared to the poetry of celebrated figures such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Dylan Thomas, that of the British poet Robert Graves (1895-1985) at first seemed to an eager Ph.D. student to be relatively unspoiled academic territory. The only book-length studies of his poetry were J. M. Cohen's Robert Graves (1960), Douglas Day's Swifter Than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves (1963), Michael Kirkham's The Poetry of Robert Graves (1969), and Robert H. Canary's Robert Graves (1980). Along with these were George Stade's Robert Graves (1967) and Patrick J. Keane's A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves (1980), both of which were extended essays rather than full-length examinations of Graves's poetic career. Considering that one could spend the better half of a week ruining one's eyes just skimming the titles of book-length critical studies of most other major modern poets, Graves seemed a perfect choice. Also, it surprised me that a poet with Graves's inventiveness and virtuosity should be so frequently left out or rushed over in modern critical surveys, such as C. H. Sisson's English Poetry 1900-1950, David Perkin's History of Modern Poetry and Yvor Winters's Forms of Discovery.

In view of the fact that critics as unlike-minded as Michael Kirkham, Martin Seymour-Smith (Graves's first



biographer), Randall Jarrell, and, most recently, D. N. G. Carter had all examined Graves's poetry from predominantly biographical and psychological standpoints, I decided that I would attempt to approach Graves's poetry from an achronological and (for lack of a more precise term) philosophical standpoint. The reasons for not wanting to write biographical exegeses were fairly simple ones: I felt that Graves's poems were more original and innovative than had been previously argued, and I believed, as I still do, that criticism which relies significantly upon biographical knowledge of a poet--especially a poet as irascible and independent as Graves--tends to emphasize the forcefulness and originality of his personality at the expense of his poetry. My own disinclination to pursue Graves's poetry with as little reference to biography as possible is, however, a question of emphasis, not one of new ideas supplanting old, and I hope that my commentaries do not imply that I feel that those who use relevant biographical information to illuminate Graves's poems are somehow missing the essential nature of his poetry.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>An intriguing defense of a certain kind of biographical criticism has been brought to my attention by a fellow Graves-addict (who was generous enough to share openly his well thought-out insights on Graves's poetry with me), Mr. Chris Faulkner. He suggested that the type of biographical criticism which is very significant is that which recognizes that Graves's consistent fussing over various editions of his collected poems implies, among other things, his unflagging interest in creating an opus of lyric poetry rather than creating a single masterpiece like "Sunday Morning," Four Quartets, or Hugh Selwyn Mauberly.

Finding a way to begin an achronological study of Graves was troublesome for several reasons, not the least of which was deciding which non-chronological ways of grouping poems would provide the most valuable format for making new discoveries about them. In Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement, D. N. G. Carter proceeds in a thematic manner. He begins with a chapter entitled, "I, Robert Graves" and follows with sections on "The Irrational," "Poems About Love," "The Present Age" and "The White Goddess." Carter's thematic strategy helps him to avoid certain pitfalls into which one might stumble, the most dangerous one in Graves's case being the idea of the continually "evolving" career of a poet (one of the main criticisms I have of Michael Kirkham's otherwise excellent study of Graves's poetry). Along with Carter and a number of Graves's other commentators--most notably Keane and Seymour-Smith--I think that Graves virtually ceased experimenting with or significantly refining his poetic forms after the mid-nineteen-fifties (very few truly memorable Graves poems were written after the publication of the 1957 Penguin paperback, Poems Selected By Himself). By studying Graves's poetry achronologically, Carter emphasizes a number of fascinating qualities in Graves's verse, such as some of his poems' "overlapping worlds of myth and old wives' tale, childhood bogey and primitive terror, [which] afford Graves a means of placing what seemed merely

contemporary, accidental and particular in his experience within the context of experience ancient, necessary and universal." <sup>2</sup>

Despite the many insightful observations made by Carter regarding Graves's thematic concerns, there is still much to be uncovered by analyzing Graves's poetry achronologically. During his most poetically fertile years, 1925-1945, Graves relentlessly concentrates on ensuring that his best poems are as perfectly "shaped" as they can be. As I attempt to show in Chapter Three, there is a workmanliness in Graves's writing, a judicious and at times fastidious attention to the construction of the poem that gives some of his most admirable works their unique, ironic finish.<sup>3</sup> The reason why, despite small similarities, none of Graves's best poems seem to be merely copies of other poems may be understood in the context of the British rural writer George Sturt's remarkable description of the wheelwright's tasks:

He it was who hewed out that resemblance from quite dissimilar blocks, for no two felloe-blocks

---

<sup>2</sup>D. N. G. Carter, Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement (London: Macmillan, 1989) 120.

<sup>3</sup>There is no question that irony, for many master stylists--such as Chaucer, Swift, and at times, Conrad--functions like the all-covering final thin-colored glaze which is applied to the work's surface, similar to the practice of certain painters. Art critics have praised the faint golden luminosity of Rembrandt's portraits which was achieved by diluting a bold color with a large quantity of white paint. Of course, in painting as in poetry, the "glaze" itself cannot harmonize elements which prove to be hopelessly disparate.

were ever alike. Knots here, shakes there, rind-galls, waney edges (edges with more or less of the bark in them), thicknesses, thinnesses, were for ever affording new chances or forbidding previous solutions, whereby a fresh problem confronted the workman's ingenuity every few minutes....At the bench you learn where a hard knot may be even helpful and a wind-shake a source of strength in a felloe; and this was the sort of knowledge that guided the old-fashioned wheelwright's chopping.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that Graves's poetic ingenuity was challenged most frequently by his own struggle to know himself and his closest companions. The anxiety associated with knowing anything for sure is always "forbidding previous solutions" in his poems. In Chapter One I explore the dangers courted by Graves in his undertaking a seemingly unambitious and "personal" poetry in an age of ostentatious poetic experimentation. This exploration led me into the undefined territory where the poet moves from minor poetic excellence into major poetic achievement. My main contention on this issue is that Graves has been ignored or undervalued because he refuses to take advantage of the broadly imaginative imagistic and philosophical license used by the more self-consciously intellectual poets of his time such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and (in his own off-beat way) William Carlos Williams. Even if Graves is seldom considered a major philosophical poet, he needs to be recognized as being a major love poet of this century.

The second and third chapters are an assessment of

---

<sup>4</sup>George Sturt, The Wheelwright's Shop (London: Cambridge UP, 1923) 45.

Graves's merits as a poetic innovator and underdog. Chapter Two offers an examination of the peculiar combination of slyness and earnestness in Graves's poetic voice. Graves's is not a filigreed style; there is less emphasis upon luxuriousness of minute detail than in the work of his poetic contemporaries. In Chapter Three, I discuss how Graves's practice of writing poems which retain the spontaneous feeling of discovery ("swifter than reason," as he puts it in "Under the Olives" CP 203) is strengthened by his adherence to the principles of rational discourse. There is an intriguing disjunction between Graves's early poetic theories of "poetic unreason" and his practice of writing pellucidly reasonable poems. As Thomas J. Kertzer observes in Poetic Argument: Studies in Modern Poetry (1988): "After being ridiculed as stiff, dictatorial, and pompous," by poets as diverse as Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, and Graves himself, "reason returns in a puckish form and argues us into amazement" (17). Much of Chapter Three is devoted to untangling the ways in which Graves's poems "argue us into amazement;" Graves's own brand of reasonable celebration of what is beguiling or elusive is often best characterized by his valuing of a certain enraptured bewilderment.

As much as critics such as Carter, Kirkham and John Woodrow Presley (in his essay, "Robert Graves: The Art of Revision") have celebrated Graves's poetic craftsmanship,

none of them, has, I feel, adequately stressed the formal variousness and inventiveness of Graves's canon. Graves skilfully handled the ballad form ("A Frosty Night," "Outlaws," "The Haunted House), blank verse ("On Dwelling," "The Pier Glass"), heroic couplets ("Alice," "The Devil's Advice To Storytellers," "The Persian Version"), and a number of other traditional verse forms. Yet his experiments in verse forms--as we see in poems as stanzaically and metrically diverse as "Welsh Incident," "Warning To Children," "The Succubus," "It Was All Very Tidy," "The Bards," "In Procession," "Counting the Beats," "Certain Mercies," "To Evoke Posterity," "Despite and Still," and "Time"--are testaments to Graves's redoubtable formal variousness. Graves is not a modern poet who discarded past traditions in English verse. Rather, he vibrantly enriched them and enlarged upon them, much in the way that his acknowledged master, Thomas Hardy, had done in his time.<sup>5</sup>

Graves, like Hardy, works in the tradition of English poets such as John Skelton, Ben Jonson, and John Clare who

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<sup>5</sup>Samuel Hynes, in his essay "The Hardy Tradition in English Poetry," argues that poets like Graves, Robert Frost and Edward Thomas were all part of "an old and central tradition...conscious of the pressures working against belief, but asserting against those pressures instinctual and emotional convictions that the universe was informed by value, and that man and nature shared a relation to that value." Thomas Hardy: The Writer and His Background, ed. Norman Page (New York: St. Martins, 1980) 188.

all seek to avoid misleading ambiguity of phrase and diction in their verse. Jonson's tenderly admonishing epigram, "To the Reader," would serve equally well as a warning to Graves's readers:

Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book in hand,  
To read it well: that is, to understand.<sup>6</sup>

In attempting to best understand Graves's individual poems, I highlight certain syntheses of poetic strategies in a number of different contexts. The context for analyzing Graves in Chapter Four is provided by a close comparison of the specific stylistic and thematic concerns which he shares with his companion-poet and avowed mentor, Laura (Riding) Jackson. In Chapter Five, I examine the assertive role of the speaker in Graves's poems as well as provide reasons why I think Graves's poetry of his late middle age is on the whole markedly inferior to his work in the thirties and early forties.

The business of knowing and knowledge in Graves's poems as explored throughout this study might best be summarized by presenting a few quotations which describe alternative (but not necessarily illogical) ways of knowing.

[I]f you think of creativity as a process of generating new connections among ideas, then it does seem inexplicable, for we cannot figure out where connections come from, if not from rule-governed relations among the concepts or ideas

---

<sup>6</sup>Ben Jonson, The Complete Poems, ed. George Parfitt, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975) 37.

themselves....The answer, I think, is that the novel connections come out of our experience. (Mark Johnson)<sup>7</sup>

There are two kinds of knowledge, through argument and experience. Argument brings conclusions and compels us to concede them, but it does not cause certainty nor remove doubts in order that the mind may remain at rest in truth, unless this is proved by experience. (Roger Bacon)<sup>8</sup>

It may well come to be recognized that the contemplative prelogical mode of knowing exhibited so forcefully in art, the knowing which terminates in recognitions and not in "conclusions," is the source from which all valuable action flows. For my own part, I am convinced that prelogical knowing is not only more reliable and comprehensive than the intellectual knowing of analysis, abstraction, generalization, and verification, but that it is in fact--in directness and vividness--the prototype to which all human knowledge is referred in action, in actual events of reality. (George Whalley)<sup>9</sup>

Graves's own attitudes towards knowledge, and particularly self-knowledge as it is conveyed by poetry, are a combination of off-handed modesty and slight mystification. When, for instance, in a 196? interview with Huw Wheldon, Graves is asked if he feels that he is addressing himself in his poems, he replies:

No, I suppose I am just doing a little bit of magic. I am putting a ring round a piece of experience so that it can stay, and anybody is welcome to find it who

---

<sup>7</sup>Mark Johnson, The Body in the Mind (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 169.

<sup>8</sup>Roger Bacon quoted by Robert Graves in his introduction to Indires Shaw, The Sufis (New York: Doubleday, 1964) xxvi.

<sup>9</sup>George Whalley, Poetic Process (New York: Meridian, 1967) xxviii.



understands poetry. It may last, it may not. That is not my concern. I have done my best to insulate it against what is not poetry.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this study I try to separate Graves's rather mystifying poetic theories--as expressed earliest in his career in Poetic Unreason (1925) and later in The White Goddess (1948; rev. 1957)--from his luminous practice as a poet. The above quotation shows Graves suggesting a sensible compromise between the "magical" or given wonders of the world and the preservative urges of the poet.

The most magical quality of Graves's verse is its wondrous surface simplicity. This simplicity is a matter of style, however, and it seldom represents any intellectual or emotional corner-cutting. Although he does not employ allusions, metaphysical conceits, or catechresis as frequently as Eliot or Stevens, it does not follow that his conclusions are therefore lightweight, easy, or restful. In fact, they often promote action or active consideration of realistic possibilities. In many of his best poems, Graves focuses upon decision-making as opposed to creating attractive but almost static mental objectifications of contemplative states such as we find in Eliot's lines:

---

<sup>10</sup>Robert Graves, in Monitor, ed. and introd. by Huw Wheldon (London: MacDonal P, 1962) 95. In this statement, Graves in part shows his relationship to the consevative motives for writing poetry as expressed by Movement poets like Philip Larkin: "The impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art." "An Interview with Paris Review" in Required Writing (London: Faber, 1983) 68.

Here is a place of disaffection  
 Time before and time after  
 In a dim light: neither daylight  
 Investing form with lucid stillness  
 Turning shadow into transient beauty  
 With slow rotation suggesting permanence  
 Nor darkness to purify the soul  
 Emptying the sensual with deprivation  
 Cleansing affection from the temporal.<sup>11</sup>

Jonathan Kertzer places Graves on the side of the mystifiers on the basis of the argument made in Poetic Unreason. Despite Kertzer's claim for Graves's enthroning of the "supra-rational" powers of poetry, however, he ignores how Graves's poetry itself is as much aimed at seeing "unreason" as it is directed towards opening up our thinking to unconventional or anti-conventional modes of proceeding. In the following chapters, I inspect several ways in which Graves's seemingly wanton disapproval of reason is more often a subversion of predictable and stale reasoning. Rather than being a poet of unreason, as he himself had once proclaimed, Graves is the poet of renovated and traditionally unacknowledged reason, like the butterfly he admires for its "flying crooked gift" (CP 65).

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Before entering into the examination of Graves's truly odd status as a "major minor poet" (to use Patrick J. Keane's half-mocking phrase), it might help to provide a

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<sup>11</sup>T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets in Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1974) 192.

brief overview of his publishing career as a poet.

His first volume, Over the Brazier (1916) shows Graves fashioning pleasant verse which has justifiably been categorized as "Georgian" poetry.<sup>12</sup> The next four slim volumes, published between 1916 and 1921,<sup>13</sup> are roughly similar in tone to his first publication. With the publishing of The Pier Glass (1921), a more consciously mature and sombre voice begins to emerge. Yet it isn't until 1926, when Poems 1914-26 appears, that one finds firm evidence that Graves is a truly tough-minded writer. Poems such as "The Nape of the Neck" and "Pygmalion to Galatea," as well as early versions of "Pure Death" and "The Cool Web," reveal Graves's growing concerns with adult modes of thinking and feeling (as opposed to the entertaining but predominantly boyish sentimentalism and off-hand scepticism of his earlier volumes).

Poems 1926-30 reveals a continuing strengthening of tone and an improved lyric grace as evidenced by poems such as "Midway," "Lost Acres," "Warning To Children," and "O Love in Me" (subsequently retitled "Sick Love"). The

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<sup>12</sup>That neither Graves's "Georgian" poetry nor that of several other poets published in Edward Marsh's collections is merely milky romanticism or "poultry-love" is argued by Myron Simon in "The Georgian Infancy of Robert Graves" in Focus on Robert Graves 4: (June 1974) 49-70.

<sup>13</sup>Goliath and David (London: Chiswick, 1916); Fairies and Fusiliers (London: Heinemann, 1917); The Treasure Box (London: Chiswick, 1919); Country Sentiment (London: Secker, 1921).

appearance of Poems 1930-33 is, in my opinion, undeniable proof that Graves aspired to be more than simply a traditional versifier dealing with commonplace poetic themes. This remarkable volume of twenty-five poems and one prose-poem includes such achievements as "The Bards," "Ulysses," "Down, Wanton, Down!" "Ogres and Pygmies," "The Legs," and "The Cell" (retitled "The Philosopher"). The next book of poems published was the Collected Poems of 1938, in which Graves discarded many poems he deemed unsatisfactory and included much new material, as well as provided significantly revised and improved versions of "Pure Death," "Warning To Children" "Lost Acres" and "It Was All Very Tidy." It also included what many believe to be one of Graves's finest (yet strangely uncharacteristic) poems, "Recalling War." Three small volumes came out during World War II, and many of the best poems from this period are found in the now-celebrated Poems 1938-45.<sup>14</sup>

After 1945, there is a falling-off in Graves's poetry. As was mentioned earlier, the reasons for this will be discussed in Chapter Five. Several critics, including Martin Seymour-Smith, Patrick J. Keane, and Randall Jarrell, blame Graves's veneration of his self-styled White Goddess for the laxity of his poetry after the mid-nineteen-forties.

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<sup>14</sup>Two of Graves's best recent critics, D. N. G. Carter and Richard Hoffpauir, argue that this collection shows Graves at his finest level of poetic grace and restraint. This volume includes the superb, "The Thieves," as well as the fine but little-known, "A Withering Herb."

I am in general agreement with them on this point, but I will elaborate on this notion as well as suggest additional reasons which I think contributed to Graves's sad collapse into something of a poetic has-been. Paul O'Prey, in his 1987 selection of Graves's poetry, tries to correct the top-heaviness of Graves's Collected Poems from 1966 to 1977. While the early volumes of Graves's collected poems show Graves ruthlessly revising as well as at times rejecting what he viewed as unfit poems (some of which were actually very good, such as "Saint" and "The Fallen Signpost"), the collections of the sixties and seventies show his inability to discern the quality work of his late middle-age. When unsuspecting readers pick up a copy of Graves's Collected Poems 1975, they are faced with 546 pages of his poems, over 300 of which were written in the last fifteen years of his poetic career. Despite its unevenness, however, I take the bulk of my quotations from the 1975 text because it includes most of Graves's best poems in their final revised forms. Unfortunately, unlike Hardy or Yeats, Graves did not experience a late renaissance or resurgence of experimental creativity.

Chapter One

"Between Ogre-Strand and Pygmy Alley":  
The Territory Between  
Major and Minor Poetry

Graves is one of those artists who inspires the praise that he is so good that one wishes he were even better. His plain, but by no means simple, poetic virtues of concision, clarity, and honesty secure him an unusual position in a century of poetic extremism. Although many critics have celebrated Graves's uncommon poetic level-headedness and wryly passionate style, some are irritated by the apotheosizing of these qualities. The Canadian poet Louis Dudek, for instance, complains of "the extravagant praises heaped on Graves," and suggests that "at his best [Graves] gives a good imitation of poetry";<sup>15</sup> and the British poet C. H. Sisson concludes that Graves is "a very marginal poet."<sup>16</sup> Both are clearly appalled by the thought of placing Graves on the level of Yeats or Eliot. On the other hand, J. M. Cohen, in his 1960 book on Graves, asserts that Graves has "advanced to become a major poet,"<sup>17</sup> while Lionel Trilling complicates the issue by commenting that "Graves is a poet of the first rank" but "the nature of his poetry repels the adjective 'great.'"<sup>18</sup> I will argue throughout this chapter that Graves almost instinctively

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<sup>15</sup>Louis Dudek, "The Case of Robert Graves," Canadian Forum (Dec. 1960) 199.

<sup>16</sup>C. H. Sisson, English Poetry 1900-1950 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1971) 193.

<sup>17</sup>J. M. Cohen, Robert Graves (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960) 117.

<sup>18</sup>Lionel Trilling, "A Ramble on Graves" in A Gathering of Fugitives (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957) 21.

avoids doing much of what other major poets of his time do. He does not try to write long poems; he eschews symbolism; he is essentially anti-elegiac; and his best poetry is predominantly free of allusions. Also, he refuses to make sonorously elevated generalizations which we as readers initially admire despite their exaggerated inclusiveness.<sup>19</sup>

My own admiration for Graves's astringent wit and technical virtuosity, as well as for the moving immediacy of his love poetry, compels me to agree with Trilling, Cohen, and others--including D. N. G. Carter and G. S. Fraser--that Graves is indeed a major poet. However, Graves's own remarks on the practice of classifying poetry in such a manner give one reasons for circumspection. In his essay "Sweeney Among the Blackbirds," Graves rather puckishly

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<sup>19</sup>My suspicion that the possibly irrelevant quibbling over Graves's poetic status may help us to discern some of the more influential prejudices and undercurrents of judgement which have formed the contents of twentieth-century anthologies--and hence, to a certain degree, poetic taste among younger poetry students--is supported by comments such as Anthony Burgess's claim that Graves has not, as have Auden, Eliot, Pound and Yeats, "modified our attitude to life and implanted certain ineffable rhythms in our brains." (Anthony Burgess, quoted in Harold Fromm's "Myths and Mishegas: Robert Graves and Laura Riding" Hudson Review 44 (Summer 1991) 200.) More interesting than Burgess's claim is Robert Richman's more defensible contention that Graves's "worship of the Goddess prevented him from securing major status as a poet, largely because it led him to adopt an anti-metaphorical, anti-symbolical stance toward poetry." ("The Poetry of Robert Graves" in The New Criterion (October 1988) 73.) I will discuss this aspect of Graves's writing in more detail in Chapters Two and Five. Certainly, a great deal of critical writing of this century has been devoted to poetry which is richly metaphorical.



states:

Anyone who has acquired a name as a young poet-- "promising" being the best that the cautious critics of the Literary Establishment will allow him--feels that he ought to go on. The Literary Establishment has a bright label for what he then produces, if he follows right models energetically enough. It is "Major Poetry"--which casually consigns the magical poetry of his early manhood to the category--"Minor Poems."

Minor poetry, so called to differentiate it from major poetry, is the real stuff.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Graves does not really confront the issues implied in such a method of classification; he merely inverts the terms, and claims that what is often considered major poetry is less valuable than minor poetry. For instance, in Graves's canon, John Milton is a thunderously pompous versifier and John Skelton is a "crue" poet.<sup>21</sup>

## I

In a compelling article entitled "Contingencies of Value," Barbara Hernstein Smith asserts: "Of particular significance for the value of 'works of art' and 'literature' is the interactive relation between the classification of an entity and the functions it [the

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<sup>20</sup>Robert Graves, "Sweeney Among the Blackbirds" in Food For Centaurs (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 104.

<sup>21</sup> For Graves's audacious and at times merely cranky assessment of the English poetic canon, see The Crowning Privilege, Graves's 1955-56 Clark lectures.

entity! is expected or desired to perform."<sup>22</sup> If this is so, one wonders if it is plausible to speak of the differing functions of major and minor poetry.

The practice of classifying poets as either major or minor is most problematic whenever one proceeds as though the terms were objective and descriptive instead of recognizing that they are subjective and evaluative. The evasiveness of these terms is certainly not a recent phenomenon, as is shown by the following comments from an unsigned review of Henry Vaughan's poems from an 1897 issue of The Spectator:

The phrase "minor poet" is constantly seen, and is vaguely and loosely applied....[The term minor poet] should convey at once the sense of a certain quality and kind of verse....Herrick, Crashaw, Smart would be ranked as minor poets because of a certain aloofness from the great human concerns.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, this reviewer never bothers to identify "the great human concerns," so it is impossible to assess fully his criteria for ranking poets. Yet his assertion that the term minor should indicate "a kind of verse" reveals that he does believe that there may actually be a type of poetry that is quintessentially "minor." One of the difficulties with denying any descriptive function to the term "minor," however, is that the term does serve as a kind of shelter

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<sup>22</sup>Barbara Hernstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value" in Canons, ed. Robert Von Halberg (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 17.

<sup>23</sup>Unsigned review, The Spectator Dec. 27, 1897: 771.

for protecting short poems from unanthologized oblivion. The term is particularly apt for those poems in which the thematic content is unquestionably light or commonplace, yet which are exquisitely crafted, such as Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes," or Landor's "Mother, I Cannot Mind My Wheel."<sup>24</sup> Given this descriptive function, it is easy to see why the term minor would be applied to a poem like Graves's "Love Without Hope":

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. (CP 13)<sup>25</sup>

Yet Graves has written many poems of a more ambitious nature than this. The use of the term minor becomes much more dubious and equivocal once we approach longer--and more morally complex--examples of his work. Finding critics who will attest that any of Graves's poems tackle complex issues can be a chore in itself: C. H. Sisson argues that Graves

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<sup>24</sup>See W. H. Auden, ed. Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets (New York: Delacorte P, 1966); A. C. Partridge, ed. The Tribe of Ben (London: Edward Arnold, 1966).

<sup>25</sup>This tiny but memorable poem demonstrates the wisdom of Yvor Winters's observations on the narrative compression of lyric poetry: "The writer of prose must substitute bulk for [poetic] intensity; he must define his experience ordinarily by giving all of its past history, the narrative logic leading up to it, whereas the experiential relations given in a good lyric poem, though particular in themselves, are applicable without alteration to a good many past histories. In this sense, the lyric is general as well as particular; in fact, this quality of transferable or generalized experience might be regarded as the defining quality of lyrical poetry." In Defense of Reason (New York: Swallow & Wm. Morrow, 1947) 19.

refuses to "dwell" on "the darker places of the mind," and he concludes by condescending to grant Graves the skimpy praise that his poetry "is neatness itself, and neatness is one of the elements of literature."<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, Graves's struggle with language in his poetry reads less like Eliot's "raid on the inarticulate" and more like a close combing-over of what can be most fully articulated. He is often dismissive of the borderless sensitivities which by virtue of their ineffable nature lie beyond the logical constraints of poetry. His eschewal of the sophisticated techniques of the French Symbolistes who influenced many of the major poets of his time--such as Eliot, Pound, and Crane--may stem from the belief with which he concludes "Lost Acres":

Yet, be assured, we have no need  
 To plot these acres of the mind  
 With prehistoric fern and reed  
 And monsters such as heroes find.

Maybe they have their flowers, their birds,  
 Their trees behind the phantom fence,  
 But of a substance without words:  
 To walk there would be loss of sense. (CP 76)

Several of Graves's detractors--including Burgess, Richman, and Sisson--have interpreted Graves's stance as resulting from a lack of poetic nerve rather than from an exercise of good poetic sense, and these critics do not consider his themes to be ambitious enough to earn him major status. The importance Graves places upon reasonableness shines forth in his comment: "Poetry (need I say?) is more than words

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<sup>26</sup>Sisson, 193.

musically arranged. It is sense; good sense; penetrating, often heart-rending sense."<sup>27</sup>

The practical difficulties involved in ranking poets as major or minor increases as one discovers the diversity of criteria which are employed by different critics and poets. W. H. Auden, in his introduction to Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets, suggests that "To qualify as major, a poet, it seems to me, must satisfy about three and a half of the following five conditions," which include: "He must write a lot" and "In the case of a major poet the process of maturing continues until he dies so that, if confronted by two poems of equal merit but written at different times, the reader can immediately say which was written first."<sup>28</sup> Auden's second criterion is not really applicable to Graves, since his later poetry is markedly inferior to the poetry of his middle years, although, curiously enough, his continual revisions to his poems throughout his career are almost always improvements. If literary criticism were to follow a zoological model, I suppose that we would have to create a separate phylum for Graves, an amphibian-like sub-species "the major-minor poet."

The hazards latent in the agreement that Graves is a special case, however, are as numerous as its advantages.

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<sup>27</sup>Graves, "Sweeney Among the Blackbirds," 106

<sup>28</sup>W. H. Auden, intro. to Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets (New York: Delacorte, 1966) 15.

Graves's unique position in the literary canon has earned him more brief honorable mentions--as well as glib dismissals--in literary surveys than it has serious analyses. Anthony Thwaite's 20th Century English Poetry: An Introduction, for example, includes the following statement in its brief section on Graves's poetry: "Though one can find traces of Graves's influence in many poets (and poets of disparate sorts), he has always been too quirky and isolated, too much his own man, to have a keen following of dogmatic disciples."<sup>29</sup> Are we to assume from this comment that it is to a poet's detriment to discourage dogmatic imitation of his poetry? Graves himself shuns the idea of poetic movements, as we see in the following observation from his and Laura Riding's collaboration, A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927): "If a poet is to achieve even the smallest reputation to-day his work must suggest a style capable of being exploited by a group; or he must either be a brilliant group-member or quick-change parasite."<sup>30</sup>

The most convincing argument for Graves's status as a minor poet is provided by Patrick J. Keane in his short book on Graves's poetry, A Wild Civility. He observes that "Graves has done almost all those things major poets do": he was "an occasionalist in many modes and tones, [and] he

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<sup>29</sup>Anthony Thwaite, 20th Century English Poetry: An Introduction (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978) 93.

<sup>30</sup>Robert Graves and Laura Riding, A Survey of Modernist Poetry (London: Heineman, 1927) 25.

eventually sought a central, focussing theme."<sup>31</sup> The focussing theme identified by Keane is love, particularly the love involved in Graves's devotion to the White Goddess. The essential drawback in his celebration of the Goddess is that "[w]hat for Graves is a central theme will seem to others merely eccentric; what to him is the persistent survival of a timeless motif is for others an atavistic aberration."<sup>32</sup> I agree with Keane that Graves's obsession with the myth of the White Goddess is more indicative of his thematic limitations than of his thematic depth and versatility. However, I believe that Keane undervalues Graves's best poems--especially those written between the late twenties and the mid-forties--and thereby diminishes their importance in relation to the ambitious yet flawed White Goddess poems. Since Graves never attempted to write anything on the scale of Four Quartets, "Le Cimetière Marin," or "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," let alone Paradise Lost or The Divine Comedy, one is obviously not compelled to discuss his work as "major" in the conventional sense.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Patrick J. Keane, A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1980) 90.

<sup>32</sup>Keane, 90.

<sup>33</sup>Graves's awareness of the probable consequences of his disinclination to write "major" poetry crops up in his book Food for Centaurs (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 104. "Eliot's Four Quartets, taken in a lump, are lengthy enough and adult enough and religious enough to pass as a masterpiece.... [Four Quartets] have elevated Eliot into a major poet. I use the word 'masterpiece' without irony, in

Yet I suspect that a critic's understandable reluctance to regard Graves as a major poet--or the conscious refusal to have any truck with such terms at all, as Michael Kirkham does--can lull him into thinking that Graves's poems are less electrifying than they really are.

Even if one accepts that the terms "major" and "minor" are inescapably evaluative, it appears that there are standards which are more difficult to isolate than, for example, W. H. Auden's claim that a major poet must exhibit "an unmistakable originality of vision and style."<sup>34</sup> To show that the terms do have residual meanings which remain in our critical lexicons, I will attempt to uncover what some of these more subtle standards of evaluation and their attendant expectations might be.

## II

One of the most original aspects of Graves's poetry is its frank presentation of the mental habit of re-thinking or reconsidering a problem. The distinctive quality of this reconsideration, however, is that it is most often manifested in a manner which appears casual in comparison to

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its original technical sense: which is a borrowing from the German Meisterstück--a piece of work done by a journeyman which satisfies his guild authorities that he is henceforth entitled to rank as master."

<sup>34</sup>Auden, Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets, 16.



the meditative weighing of alternatives that one finds in, for example, "Ode to a Nightingale," "Among School Children," and "Sunday Morning." Graves tries to narrow the distance between our daily logic of decision-making and our more elaborate modes of philosophical speculation. This does not mean that he treats important themes flippantly, but that he is suspicious of the more abstruse methods of poetic discourse.

If we examine the admirable short poem, "A Former Attachment," we can see in action this practice of muted reconsideration and how it serves Graves's anti-elegiac temperament. He begins the poem in what could be mid-sentence, implying that his previous perspective was unsuitable and not essential to his conclusion:

And glad to find, on again looking at it,  
 It had meant even less to me than I had thought--  
 You know the ship is moving when you see  
 The boxes on the quayside slide away  
 And become smaller--and feel a calm delight  
 When the port's cleared and the coast's out of sight,  
 And ships are few, each on its proper course,  
 With no occasion for approach or discourse. (CP 79)

The at times guilty desire to make a clean departure from past attachments, and the honest admission of one's relief as the past "slide[s] away," is interestingly captured by the odd rhyming of "proper course" with "or discourse." It is as if the slight awkwardness of this rhyme mimics the speaker's fugitive awareness that as genuine as this "calm delight" may be, it is perhaps only a fleetingly aloof

state.<sup>35</sup>

If one wishes to argue for Graves's status as a major poet on the grounds of his "unmistakable originality," one must try to see how he measures-up against other poets who are generally considered to be innovators in craft and sensibility. One of the largest threats to Graves's status as a major poet is his drive to pare issues down to their barest essentials, thus omitting the contemplative garnishes which are so relished by other modern poets. Graves is perhaps too aware that human motivation and action can be vitiated by false--though fascinating or ravishing--sources of confusion. Through a comparison of Graves's "Certain Mercies" and a stanza from what is widely considered to be a major poem, Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," I would like to begin exploring what I have found to be a few of the reigning unacknowledged assumptions that one may have when reading those who are considered to be either minor or major poets.

Now must all satisfaction  
Appear mere mitigation  
Of an accepted curse?

Must we henceforth be grateful  
That the guards, though spiteful,  
Are slow of foot and wit?

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<sup>35</sup>cf. Philip Larkin's "Whatever Happened," The Less Deceived (London: Marvell, 1955) 25. Larkin also uses the image of a ship leaving port as a metaphor for our manner of reconsidering the past; however, Larkin, in his characteristically self-denigrating and humorous way, implies that a "detached" perspective may as likely obscure our understanding of the past as bring "'significance.'"

That by night we may spread  
Over the plank bed  
A thin coverlet?

That the rusty water  
In the unclean pitcher  
Our thirst quenches?

That the rotten, detestable  
Food is yet eatable  
By us ravenous?

That the prison censor  
Permits a weekly letter?  
(We may write: 'We are well.')

That, with patience and deference,  
We do not experience  
The punishment cell?

That each new indignity  
Defeats only the body,  
Pampering the spirit  
With obscure, proud merit? (CP 90)

She says, "But in contentment I still feel  
The need of some imperishable bliss."  
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her  
Alone shall come fulfilment to our dreams  
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves  
Of sure obliteration on our paths,  
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths  
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love  
Whispered a little out of tenderness,  
She makes the willow shiver in the sun  
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze  
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.  
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears  
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste  
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.<sup>36</sup>

Graves's poem opens with the tone of a bitter  
consideration of one's lot in life as one grows older. The  
tainted nature of each physical satisfaction is tersely

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<sup>36</sup>Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning," The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1955) 68-69.

catalogued before Graves asks his final question which warns us of the spiritual pride which so often accompanies our ability to accept physically austere circumstances. The "plank bed" and "unclean pitcher" contribute to the atmosphere of starkness and discomfort which opposes the idea of "pampering" in the final stanza. These remarkably plain and specific details contrast perfectly with the "obscure, proud merit."

Although the stanza that I have selected from Stevens is part of a larger and more complex meditation, it will serve to illustrate some of the qualities which I believe prompt one to view it as an important part of a "major" poem. The Stevens stanza acknowledges the restlessness of the human spirit (or in Stevens's more commonly used secular term, the imagination) which attends even our moments of supposed contentment. The phrase "imperishable bliss," with its lush assonance and its lovely, if vague, suggestiveness, is unlike any phrase in Graves's poem. One might say that Graves's phrase "all satisfaction" is just as vague as "imperishable bliss," but whereas in Graves's case, the phrase is used as a generalization from which to make an abstract observation, in Stevens's case, his phrase is referring to something which seems to elude our daily thoughts and language.

Stylistically, Stevens employs a far more sonorous and flowing line with elegantly draped enjambments and a lush

use of repeated vowel and consonant sounds. Graves uses short, abrupt lines and flattened-out rhymes ("satisfaction/mitigation"; "grateful/spiteful") which contribute to the overall clipped-sounding and scissored-off quality to the meditation. The angularity of Graves's poem suits its opposition to the spiritual "pampering" which is savaged by the wry criticism in the final stanza.

Outside the White Goddess poems, Graves does not provide the provocative and dramatic generalizations, nor the imagistic and sensuous details, that many of us might expect to find in major modern poetry. Yet these features should not be viewed as being essential to what is best in the poetry of our century. The vatic tone of Stevens's proposition that "Death is the mother of beauty, hence from her,/ Alone, shall come fulfilment of our dreams/ And our desires" is foreign to Graves's plain-spoken yet dignified manner of writing in most of his best poems. Graves is very cautious in his use of generalizations. Interestingly, in an earlier version of "Certain Mercies," the first stanza reads, "Now must all satisfaction/ Become mere mitigation/ Of an accepted curse?"<sup>37</sup> The replacement of "Become" with "Appear" emphasizes the complex nature of the term "satisfaction" as it is viewed in this poem. The "new indignities" with which we must now be satisfied are not as

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<sup>37</sup>Robert Graves, Collected Poems 1914-47 (London: Cassell, 1948) 135.

significant in themselves as is our attitude toward this satisfaction; thus the question is not really what our satisfaction becomes, but how it appears to us. "Become" might suggest a process that is irreversible, a dramatic change, whereas "Appear" shows more explicitly that Graves is dealing with the problem of how we look at our experience. Although the statement "Death is the mother of beauty" can also be read as an expression of a personal attitude, the tone is more like that of a pronouncement or a foregone conclusion.

Stevens does not follow a rigorous logical structure in the stanza I have quoted, but neither does he abandon the appearance of logic, which we associate with terms like "hence" and "although." While it is obvious that the Graves poem calls into question the validity of each of its observations, it is much more difficult to establish Stevens's attitude toward the validity of his statements. It seems to me that one of the most significant aspects of our expectations of major poetry is the imaginative license which we desire the poem to exhibit. It is as if we expect the poem, like Keats's Grecian urn, to "tease us out of thought." The statement, "Death is the mother of beauty" does not necessarily provoke a consideration of how it might be true. We are likely to accept that it seems beyond the capacity of strict logic to prove--or firmly disprove--such a statement. We may infer from this statement, when

combined with the images in the remainder of the stanza of the shivering willow, new plums, and impassioned maidens, that only a full recognition of death allows us to see what is most precious, and therefore beautiful to us. However, one may perceive a type of beauty--for instance, a sense of Christian hope or Stoic endurance--which does not rely exclusively upon death for "fulfilment." Thus, the generalization made by Stevens about death relies as much upon a logically unprovable concept as does the Christian idea of immortality which the woman in the poem aspires to replace.

### III

The basic effect of this imaginative license to which I refer is that we tend to expect major poems to make major claims about human experience. Whether it is Yeats's "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" and "All's changed, changed utterly/ A terrible beauty is born"; or Eliot's "human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality"; or Auden's "We must love one another or die," there is an impressively sonorous quality in these generalizations which we often initially admire despite their exaggerated inclusiveness. Yet even if we find generalizations such as these to be false, or simplistic, we may be sympathetic to the human compulsion to make large claims, or more importantly,

grateful for an articulation of a perceived truth which impels us to justify or modify our own convictions.

Graves's reluctance to make large generalizations stems from a fear of becoming didactic as well as from a distrust of the value of excessive speculation. In his book, On English Poetry (1922), a work which Graves described as "being based on rules which regulate my own work at the moment," he observes that "Among the most usual heresies held about poetry is the idea that the first importance of the poet is his 'message'; this idea probably originated with the decline of polite sermon-writing, when the poet was expected to take on double duty."<sup>38</sup> Also, in his Cambridge lectures, The Crowning Privilege (1955), we see that Graves is as dismissive of the overtly mystical side of poetry as he is of its pontifical duties. An example of this attitude may be seen in his comment concerning William Blake: "poetry and prophecy make ill-assorted bedfellows; prophecy, especially the evangelical sort, will claim sheet, blankets, and both pillows in God's name, and let poetry die of exposure."<sup>39</sup>

The wariness of making all-encompassing claims in poems does not develop from Graves's sense of polite resignation, or from an inability to sustain strong convictions, but

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<sup>38</sup>Robert Graves, On English Poetry (New York: Knopf, 1922) 125.

<sup>39</sup>Robert Graves, The Crowning Privilege (London: Cassell, 1955) 135.



rather emerges from a desire for poetic precision. Graves does not deny that we may have moments which are so intense that they promote something comparable to religious insight and its large-scale convictions, but he does not overestimate the value of these "hectic times."<sup>40</sup> To illustrate this point, I will compare two passages from Blake's Milton and a passage from Eliot's Four Quartets with Graves's "The Fallen Signpost":

For in this Period the Poet's Work is Done: and all the  
Great  
Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a  
Period  
Within a Moment: A Pulsation of the Artery. (Plate  
29:1-3)<sup>41</sup>

There is a moment in each Day that Satan cannot find  
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious  
find  
This moment & it multiply & when it once is found  
It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed.  
(Plate 35: 42-45)<sup>42</sup>

There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment

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<sup>40</sup>This phrase is lifted from I. A. Richards's Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925): "It is generally those who have the least refined views of value who most readily believe that highly valuable hours must be paid for afterwards. Their conception of a 'hectic time' as the summit of human possibilities explains the opinion. For those who find that the most valuable experiences are those which are also most fruitful of further valuable experiences no problem arises." 59

<sup>41</sup>William Blake, Milton, Blake's Poetry and Designs, eds. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: Norton, 1979) 284.

<sup>42</sup>Blake, Milton, 295.

And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been. ("East Coker" II)<sup>43</sup>

The signpost of four arms is down,  
But one names your departure town:  
With this for guide you may replant  
Your post and choose which road you want--

Logic that only seems obscure  
To those deliberately not sure  
Whether a journey should begin  
At crossroads or with origin.

The square post, and the socket square--  
Now which way round to set it there?  
Thus from the problem coaxing out  
Four further elements of doubt,

They make the simple cross-roads be  
A crux of pure dubiety  
Demanding how much more concern  
Than to have taken the wrong turn!<sup>44</sup>

Each of these quotations deals with a relationship between knowledge and experience, and how they operate within a moment in time. In the passages from Blake, the ideal union of knowledge and experience is isolated in a moment, and this moment must be multiplied to maintain some kind of continuous epiphany. There is a curious imaginative appeal in this idea, but its inapplicability to our daily lives seems obvious when we consider the phrase "if rightly placed." One assumes that Blake means something very specific here, but he does not even give us a hint in the larger context of the poem how we are to recognize this

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<sup>43</sup>T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets in Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber, 1974) 199.

<sup>44</sup>Robert Graves, "The Fallen Signpost," Collected Poems 1961 (New York: Doubleday, 1961) 199.

"place." The idea of a spiritually regenerative moment in our lives is a pleasing notion, but since this "moment" is not more vividly rendered, it is disingenuous to assume that we can know with much exactitude what Blake means.

Eliot's passage has the appearance of lucidity, but it is somehow unsatisfying. The idea that knowledge acquired from experience is possibly insufficient to the newness of "every moment" is fine; but the more impressionistic idea that each moment, along with being a "new" "valuation" is also a "shocking" one is harder to accept. We can certainly experience moments when a sudden "valuation of all we have been" is so intense that it is shocking, but the thought of "every" moment being like this seems worse than watching hours of music videos, which, despite their frantic scene changes, their hallucinatory, overlapping images, and their multitudinous camera angles, quickly lose their shockingness. In The Living Principle (1975), F. R. Leavis locates the most damaging imprecision in the passage when he observes that Eliot "still uses the word 'pattern,' but a 'pattern' that is 'new in every moment' contradicts the meaning of the word."<sup>45</sup> Eliot's passage is faintly reminiscent of the famous lines from Middlemarch where George Eliot refers to "That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, [which] has not yet wrought

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<sup>45</sup>F. R. Leavis, The Living Principle (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975) 201.

itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our friends could hardly bear much of it."<sup>46</sup> Yet the minutely dissecting sensitivity of T. S. Eliot's passage suggests to me that what for George Eliot was a sombre speculation must be for the author of "East Coker" an inescapable "pattern" of anxiety and uncertainty. The perceptions analysed in the Blake and Eliot passages are not of the same order as that of the Graves poem, but the comparison may serve to illustrate a significant disparity in temperaments. I believe that Graves, like George Eliot, is more interested in gaining a clearer understanding of our "coarse emotions" before he presumes to understand more sophisticated emotional possibilities.

Both Eliot and Blake are interested in the power of a moment's insight, a glimpse which might be described as a type of religious revelation. In the Graves poem, there is an acknowledgement of the complex possibilities which may cross one's mind in a given moment, but the dilemma is not accompanied by the anxieties of Eliot, nor the extreme optimism of Blake. The tone of Graves's poem is one of self-assurance, not of self-righteous inspiration. The speaker of "The Fallen Signpost" has learned from experience that one gains nothing from allowing each new decision-making process to become a "crux of pure dubiety." One

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<sup>46</sup>George Eliot, Middlemarch (1871-72; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956) 144.

might argue that there is only a limited value to this knowledge, but perhaps it is preferable to have knowledge that is of some value, rather than a belief in either the continuous certainty of each moment (once it has been "rightly placed"), or the continual uncertainty one sees in all falsifying patterns of knowledge imposed upon each new moment.

"The Fallen Signpost" is not one of Graves's best poems (he obviously came to think so himself, since he omitted it from his last two volumes of collected poems), but it does display both his characteristically dry delivery and his scepticism toward unnecessary speculation. Graves's candidly confident tone is developed through a type of emotional restraint which nevertheless frequently acknowledges the recurrent temptations to indulge one's passions. He does not imply that he is immune to passionate indulgences, as we see in "A Love Story," for instance, where he refers to his romantic perceptions of a landscape as "solemnities not easy to withstand." Yet he is determined not to mistake emotionally self-justifying speculations for intellectual cogencies.

This quality of emotional restraint is most evident in poems like "The Shot," "To Walk on Hills" and "To Sleep." Each of these poems issues a warning against allowing one's imagination to become a slave to emotional impulses. In "To Sleep" the speaker confesses that "Loving in part, I did not

see you whole" and attempts to create a full image of his lover in the manner of a "vexed insomniac" who "dream-forges" "half-articulated" images of reality. This desperate practice is compared to "dawn birds" that fly "blindly at the panes/ In curiosity rattling out their brains" (CP 126). The pointlessness and violence of an overactive imagination are also conveyed in the final line of the poem where "all self-bruising heads loil into sleep" (CP 126). Graves displays an even greater disdain for reckless, emotionally-driven conjecture in "The Shot" where he writes of "The curious heart" which "plays with its fears." The heart is described as hurling "a shot through the ship's planks" without first sweeping a "lingering glance around/ For land or shoal or cask adrift." This careless indulgence is redressed in the second stanza:

O weary luxury of hypothesis--  
 For human nature, honest human nature  
 (Which the fear-pampered heart denies)  
 Knows its own miracle: not to go mad. (CP 122)

Graves's indebtedness to Renaissance authors is doubly evident here. Rhetorically, the lines resemble a passage from Fulke Greville's Senecan drama, Mustapha:

O wearisome condition of humanity!  
 Born under one law, to another bound:  
 Vainly begot, and yet forbidden vanity,  
 Created sick, commanded to be sound:  
 What meaneth nature by these diverse laws?  
 Passion and reason self-division cause.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Fulke Greville, Mustapha, Selected Writings of Fulke Greville, ed. Joan Rees (London: Althone P, 1973) 138.

In emotional tenor, Graves's lines are reminiscent of King Lear's passionate outburst when he considers too vividly his daughters' ingratitude: "Your kind old father, whose frank heart gave all--/ O, that way madness lies, let me shun that!"<sup>48</sup> For Graves, as for several Renaissance poets, certain kinds of hypothesizing are treated with grim suspicion because of their seemingly inevitable culmination in insanity.

"To Walk on Hills" (CP 85) presents a more satirical view of emotional tendencies which are not tempered with intellectual discretion. The opening stanza proposes that

To walk on hills is to employ legs  
 As porters of the head and heart  
 Jointly adventuring towards  
 Perhaps true equanimity.

Yet this endeavor is seen as the cause of an even wider separation between the intellect and the emotions rather than as the cause of any reconciliation:

Heart records the journey  
 As memorable indeed;  
 Head reserves opinion,  
 Confused by the wind.

The reluctance of the "head" to be impressed by what a few stanzas later is called the heart's "portentous trifling" as the heart "does double duty,/ As heart, and as head" is an understandable, and perhaps even commendable, wariness of lax emotionalism. The final stanza of the poem is tinged

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<sup>48</sup>William Shakespeare, King Lear, The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 1276.

with arrogance, but it seems that the poet is attacking a kind of Wordsworthian nature-worshipping rather than simply debunking the shepherds:

To walk on hills is to employ legs  
 To march away and lose the day.  
 Tell us, have you known shepherds?  
 And are they not a witless race,  
 Prone to quaint visions?  
 Not thus from solitude  
 (Solitude sobers only)  
 But from long hilltop striding.

There is a sizeable variety of responses in Graves's poetry to the "age into which I was born, [which] in spite of its enjoyable lavishness of entertainment, has been intellectually and morally in perfect confusion."<sup>49</sup> Graves focuses more upon the confusion itself than on the "age into which I was born." The predominant attitude in Graves's poems towards intellectual, moral and emotional confusion is one of self-admonishment; but there are also several important poems where the state of confusion is examined for what may be learned by confronting certain perplexities.

A substantial difference between Graves and his major poetic contemporaries regarding their treatment of confusion is that Graves seldom elevates one's engagement with various complex mental states into a sublime or venerably mysterious occasion. There are no lines in Graves which dramatize the apparent limits of one's knowledge, like Yeats's "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance/ How can we know the

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<sup>49</sup>Robert Graves, introduction to Collected Poems (Edinburgh: Constable, 1938) xxiv.



dancer from the dance?"<sup>50</sup> or Eliot's "music heard so deeply/ That it is not heard at all, but you are the music/ While the music lasts,"<sup>51</sup> or even Auden's "Dear, I know nothing of/ Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love/ Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur/ Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape."<sup>52</sup> One of the most rewarding aspects of Graves's poetry dealing with confusion is his ability to recognize the value of confusion without transforming this value into a sprawling visionary mystery or a lofty, sombre futility. This awareness is best represented in his poem, "In Broken Images," which begins:

He is quick, thinking in clear images;  
I am slow, thinking in broken images.

The next four couplets point out the opposing methods of the two thinkers, and the poem concludes with the observations:

He continues quick and dull in his clear images  
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He in a new confusion of his understanding;  
I in a new understanding of my confusion. (CP 62)

The recognition of the inadequacy of the I's comprehension is not an occasion for despair in the poem but

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<sup>50</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children," Collected Poems (London: MacMillan, 1982) 242.

<sup>51</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages" V, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber, 1974) 213.

<sup>52</sup>W. H. Auden, "In Praise of Limestone" in W. H. Auden: Selected Poems ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1979) 182.

rather an admission of the need to accept uncertainties. This is not viewed as a cheerful acceptance as much as it is an inevitable one, if one hopes to continue to think without the dubious encouragement of "clear images." This poem is similar to the proposition in Wallace Stevens's "Reply to Papini" that "The poet does not speak in ruins/ Nor stand there making orotund consolations:/ He shares the confusions of intelligence."<sup>53</sup> Yet Stevens's shared "confusions" are those of a poet with an extremely sensuous and far more exotic imagination. The sparseness of images in Graves's poetry might be seen to coincide with a moral austerity in his thinking; however, this imagistic paucity is not indicative of self-denial but rather of detachment. Though he certainly employs images, Graves is more specifically concerned with the poetic argument than with local color and ornament which is provided by these images.

#### IV

Between 1910 and 1940, many English-speaking poets were attempting to write a poetry of sensuous density. I will discuss how Graves worked against this trend in Chapter Two. For the moment, however, I would like to point out how his use of imagery, even though it is not as immediately striking, can be just as complex and imaginative as that of

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<sup>53</sup>Wallace Stevens, "Reply to Papini," 446.

other modern poets. J. V. Cunningham persuasively argues that an "image" implies visualization, whereas a conceit is "among other possibilities, the discovery of a proposition referring to one field of experience in terms of an intellectual structure derived from another field."<sup>54</sup> A comparison of passages from Graves's "Warning to Children," Eliot's "Gerontion," and Stevens's "The Snow Man" will help to show how Graves's conceits may invite a kind of visualization without being particularly sensuous.

Graves's poem begins with the description of a seemingly whimsical imaginative scene:

Children, if you dare to think  
 Of the greatness, rareness, muchness,  
 Fewness of this precious only  
 Endless world in which you say  
 You live, you think of things like this:  
 Blocks of slate enclosing dappled  
 Red and green, enclosing tawny  
 Yellow nets, enclosing white  
 And brown acres of dominoes,  
 Where a neat brown paper parcel  
 Tempts you to untie the string.  
 On the island a large tree  
 On the tree a husky fruit. (CP 30)

Although enough details are supplied for one to arrange some kind of mental picture of the "world" delineated in these lines, the idea of something like a succession of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls--larger ones enclosing consecutively smaller ones--seems to be more significant than our ability to visualize the nets themselves or any other of the

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<sup>54</sup>J. V. Cunningham, "Logic and Lyric," The Collected Essays of J. V. Cunningham (Chicago: Swallow, 1976) 168.

individual objects. In Stevens's poem, on the other hand, we may very well envision a more detailed "picture" of reality:

One must have a mind of winter  
 To regard the frost on the boughs  
 Of the pine trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun....<sup>55</sup>

Not only are we given the exact type of evergreens to visualize, but also vividly descriptive details about each type. The coldness of the scene is emphasized by the hardness implied in the "crusted" snow on the pines; the texture of the branches and the brightness of the sun's reflection off their iciness is conveyed by "The spruces rough in the distant glitter." The most effective image is, of course, also the most surprising and specific, the "junipers shagged with ice." Since the correlation between an icy tree and a mass of tangled hair seems incongruous, we are compelled to re-examine our perception of an icy tree and consider the aptness of the poet's association. We may then visualize the various lengths of overlapping icicles as they hang from the spiny boughs and decide that the image could be reconciled with our own experience of looking at trees. The past-participle construction "shagged" also emphasizes the stillness of the frozen branches, which would

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<sup>55</sup>Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," 9.

not have been as evident had the poet used the more common adjectival form, "shaggy."

Graves's poem invites us to look at the disparateness of the world in which we say we live; therefore, he is not especially interested in focussing our attention upon the unique qualities of each item that he mentions. The "husky fruit" (a coconut? a pineapple?) and "neat brown paper parcel" are easy enough to visualize, but we are not induced to reconsider our sensory perceptions of them as we are in the Stevens poem. Graves investigates relationships between images; the sensory objects referred to in most of his poems are predominantly illustrative. Unlike many other modern poets, Graves does not provide "images that yet/ Fresh images beget."<sup>56</sup> For a deeply imaginative thinker who is preoccupied with the effects of the irrational upon our everyday lives, Graves is surprisingly uncompelled to make us look at (or listen to, touch, taste or smell, for that matter) the subtly inspirational and influential particularities of our physical surroundings. He does, however, enjoin us to scrutinize the nature of our relationships to our environments.

Graves would not share Eliot's view expressed in "The Metaphysical Poets" regarding the importance of the poet's

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<sup>56</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Byzantium" Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1982) 281.

"direct sensuous apprehension of thought."<sup>57</sup> Whereas Graves most often uses relatively plain referents in the course of making a reasoned, if sometimes unorthodox observation, Eliot tends to blend his conceits and images so that the sensuousness is rendered almost indistinguishable from the thought. Consider how in Eliot's "Gerontion" "History" is described as giving "when our attention is distracted/ And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions/ That the giving famishes the craving,"<sup>58</sup> and how we are led from a tactual sense of confusion to a starved sense of mental frustration. Eliot switches from one physical sense to another with such apparent ease that we cannot be certain if he is attempting a clever synaesthetic effect or if there is a genuine combination of physical sensations which accompanies such anguished thoughts. Eliot's conceit recalls Enobarbus's observation about Cleopatra that "Other women cloy/ The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry/ Where she most satisfies."<sup>59</sup> Unlike Shakespeare, however, Eliot intentionally mixes his metaphor so that the feeding of a craving is given the unexpected quality of suppleness. The connotations of

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<sup>57</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot, ed. and introd. Frank Kermode (London: Faber. 1975) 63.

<sup>58</sup>T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 40.

<sup>59</sup>William Shakespeare, Anthony and Cleopatra, The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 1357.

"supple" as that which is flexible and easily manipulated (OED) are apt associations for confusion, but suppleness is certainly not a quality that one would associate with feeding. I am not suggesting that Eliot's conceit is marred, but it does represent an intentional wrenching of decorum that one very rarely encounters in Graves's poems.

In A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927), Graves and Riding give some explicit reasons why they are suspicious of elaborate image clusters in poetry. They view modernist poetry as a type of poetic impressionism which

describes an object by creating in the reader the indefinite feelings he would have on first seeing, not by giving definite facts about it....These so-called 'indefinite' feelings of impressionism, therefore, must be expressed in painstakingly precise images, since the effect of a poem depends on an accurate identity of the reader's feelings with the poet's.<sup>60</sup>

Graves is not interested in transmitting his feelings to the reader; he only describes his feelings in order to make clear the nature of the emotions which must be judged and controlled, or at last accepted for what they are. Instead of identifying with the poet's expressed emotional state, we are urged by Graves to analyze the adequacy of the poet's assessment of this state. It is easy to see how Graves's and Riding's apparently normative, xenophobic, and moralistic tone in their critical prose would irritate the supporters of modernist verse: "M. Valéry provides only one

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<sup>60</sup>A Survey of Modernist Poetry in Robert Graves, The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry: 1922-1949 (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949) 74-75.

example of those modern French theories of poetry which have had such an abnormal and unwholesome influence on the younger poets of America and England."<sup>61</sup>

It takes a considerable effort in our time to rescue the term "wholesome" from breakfast cereal slogans, and images of Boy Scouts and 'Ivory Soap' girls. Most of us would consider it presumptuous for an intelligent person to use the word "wholesome" without heavily ironic overtones. Graves is quite unabashed in his advocacy of maintaining what might be called a 'healthy' attitude, as we see in his poem "No More Ghosts":

The patriarchal bed with four posts  
Which was a harborage of ghosts  
Is hauled out from attic glooms  
And cut to wholesome furniture for wholesome rooms.  
(CP 117)

In his early book in which he tries to apply psychoanalytic theories to poetry, Poetic Unreason (1925), Graves writes of A. E. Housman that he does not "recant a word of the sentiment 'Heaven and Earth ail from the prime foundations,' but for Mr. Hardy all along whatever may be wrong with Heaven, Earth is honest and wholesome."<sup>62</sup> Graves's conception of wholesomeness is in no sense a vapid cheerfulness which is immune to expressions of human misery. What his idea of wholesomeness does oppose is any indulgence

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<sup>61</sup>Common Asphodel, 76.

<sup>62</sup>Robert Graves, Poetic Unreason (London: Cecil Palmer, 1925) 259.



in self-pitying resignation. Graves celebrates our small-scale victories over personal failings; he doesn't, as Auden implores in memory of Yeats, "Sing of human unsuccess/ In a rapture of distress." As a World War I veteran, Graves's apotheosis of wholesomeness owes more to a prudent and therapeutic endeavor to cope with one's own life than it does to any solipsistic and facile withdrawal from public responsibility.<sup>63</sup>

V

The seriousness with which Graves handles what might be viewed by some as merely personal themes is evident if we examine two of his greatest poems, "Sick Love" (1931) and

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<sup>63</sup>Even a cursory glance at "Recalling War," which Graves did not see fit to include in his final volume of collected poems, should prove that he does not refrain from writing about larger social issues in his poetry because of any squeamishness or inability on his part. His reverberating description of war as "No mere discord of flags/ But an infection of common sky," and as a "foundering of sublimities/ Extinction of each happy art and faith/ By which the world had still kept head in air" displays a succinct flair for generalizations. My own suspicion, unprovable though it may be, is that Graves thinks that observations of this kind--as verbally resonant as they may be--inevitably oversimplify or domesticate matters of great seriousness and pain to a degree that threatens to inflate poetic statement into high-minded hindsight.

That some critics believe that Graves's poetry betrays a febrile desire to escape from and deny the horrors of reality is evident in Robert Richman's claim that "Graves fixation [on the White Goddess] seems to have been derived from the terror of reality instilled in him as a child." "The Poetry of Robert Graves," The New Criterion (Oct. 1988) 73.



Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.

Ay, look: high heaven and earth ail from the prime  
 foundation;  
 All thoughts to rive the heart are here, and all are  
 vain:  
 Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation--  
 Oh why did I awake? when shall I sleep again?<sup>64</sup>

O Love, be fed with apples while you may,  
 And feel the sun and go in royal array,  
 A smiling innocent on the heavenly causeway,

Though in what listening horror for the cry  
 That soars in outer blackness dismally,  
 The dumb blind beast, the paranoiac fury:

Be warm, enjoy the season, lift your head,  
 Exquisite in the pulse of tainted blood,  
 That shivering glory not to be despised.

Take your delight in momentariness,  
 Walk between dark and dark--a shining space  
 With the grave's narrowness, though not its peace.  
 (CP 49)

Whereas in Housman's poem we are only presented with the drudgery and monotony in life, so aptly rendered in the flattened iambic rhythm of "I pace the earth, and drink the air and feel the sun"; in Graves's lines there is at least an acknowledgement of the palpable pleasure of feeling "the sun and go[ing] in royal array," even if there is an impending "horror" and "paranoiac fury." Graves avoids the pompously inert figurative language we see in Housman's "lightless in the quarry" and "Let us endure an hour." Instead of a hopeless resignation "but for a season," Graves implores Love to "enjoy the season" despite its

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<sup>64</sup>A. E. Housman, "Be Still, My Soul" Collected Poems (Toronto: Penguin, 1956) 83.

momentariness. The only emotions which Housman even pretends to feel in his poem are "Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation," while Graves takes the fear and horror into consideration--and renders them as vividly as Housman doesn't--but feels that Love is "not to be despised" and that one may replace the passionate intensity of hate with that of love. Both poems show an awareness of imperfection: Housman's windy lament, "high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation"; Graves's admission of the mortal (and perhaps even sinful) "tainted blood" of mankind. There is also a stark opposition drawn in each poem between the peacefulness of the grave and the anxieties of life; yet Graves emphasizes the possibility of the "shining" quality of life whereas Housman stresses his preference for the numb solace of being "lightless in the quarry."

The relentlessly dismal tone of Housman's poem takes the sobering wisdom of Ecclesiastes I:2 "Vanity of vanities, sayeth the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity" and distorts it by placing it in a perspective that is devoid of faith. The title and first line of Graves's poem are also derived from the Bible, and Graves's choice of a passage from The Song of Solomon is as revealing as is Housman's choice: "Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples; for I am sick of love" (II:5). Graves's title conflates the ideas of love as affliction and love as an admission of the overwhelming power of our emotional desires. The wholesome

outlook of "Sick Love" resides in the statements of an almost existential courage to "lift your head" and "Walk between dark and dark" despite the "listening horror or the cry/ That soars in outer blackness dismally." Graves's wholesomeness does not ignore the reasons for despair, but it will not subside into a defeated plangency like Housman's "Oh why did I awake? when shall I sleep again?"

Housman is not the only post-Victorian poet who provided a secular interpretation of the world-weary philosophy found in Ecclesiastes; in Eliot we also find a potent realization of the tediousness and futility of human endeavors. It may be that Graves's more constructive and vigorous, if also somewhat sceptical, awareness of the potential of human relationships is seen by some critics--like Sisson and Dudek--to lack the added insight regarding the immense difficulty of communication which they believe that any major modern poet must diagnose. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot's reworking of the passage "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the sun" from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes into "And indeed there will be time....time for a hundred indecisions,/ And for a hundred visions and revisions,/ Before the taking of a toast and tea" characterizes the utter triviality to which human ideals have been reduced. Eliot examines several of the elaborate artificialities of social decorum which become barriers to forming meaningful

relationships, but the exaggerated sensitivity which he gives Prufrock makes it impossible for him "to rejoice and to do good in his life" as Ecclesiastes III:12 recommends. Prufrock may evoke our compassion partly because we accept that he is trapped within a historically recognizable time, place and social class. We rarely encounter specific urban details like "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" or "lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows" in Graves's poems, but his omission of a good deal of historically locatable detail in his poetry does not justify Garry Geddes's observation that "Graves's highly organic poetry may well seem out of place, if not anachronistic, in the age of permanent literary revolution."<sup>65</sup>

Graves's most successful poems are concerned with personal relationships, not with social ones, and he strives to eliminate the social details which he considers irrelevant to what his friend the poet Alun Lewis described in a letter to him as "the single poetic theme of Life and Death."<sup>66</sup> One of the great revelations for Graves is not the invigorating and mysterious awe generated by a fresh acknowledgement that we exist, but rather the bewildering revelation of the predicament that we co-exist, that we

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<sup>65</sup>Garry Geddes, Twentieth-Century Poetry and Poetics, ed. Garry Geddes (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1973) 626.

<sup>66</sup>Alun Lewis quoted in Robert Graves, "These Be Your Gods, O, Israel!" The Crowning Privilege: The Clark Lectures 1954-55; Also Various Essays on Poetry (London: Cassell, 1955) 135.

share the world with other selves, particularly with those of our lovers.

Graves consistently attempts to find some human truth that we can know in its singleness; he desires a knowledge that is irreducible, and which is uncluttered by misapprehensions and distractions. This idealistic notion of essential truth may seem like an absurdly sheltered perspective. Graves knew from almost the outset (and certainly when he began his association with Riding in 1926) that he was struggling outside an intellectual community which was trying to accommodate a proliferation of morally and socially relativistic paradigms of knowledge. But Graves's single-minded poetic practice has nothing to do with narrow-mindedness or parochialism. Take, for example, his extraordinary "Sure Death":

We looked, we loved, and therewith instantly  
 Death became terrible to you and me.  
 By love we disentrained our natural terror  
 From every comfortable philosopher  
 Or tall, grey doctor of divinity:  
 Death stood at last in his true rank and order.

It happened soon, so wild of heart were we,  
 Exchange of gifts grew to a malady:  
 Their worth rose always higher on each side  
 Till there seemed nothing but ungivable pride  
 That yet remained ungiven, and this degree  
 Called a conclusion not to be denied.

Then we at last bethought ourselves, made shift  
 And simultaneously this final gift  
 Gave: each with shaking hands unlocks  
 The sinister, long, brass-bound coffin-box,  
 Unwraps pure death, with such bewilderment  
 As greeted our love's first acknowledgement. (CP 48)

Graves reveals the necessity of confronting one's death

without the abstract rationalizations of philosophy or the dim consolations provided by religious orthodoxy. The connection made between love and death in this poem calls to mind the type of relationship defined by James Smith in his essay, "On Metaphysical Poetry" (1934): "It [a 'true' metaphor] is no association of things on account of a similarity due to an accident....but of things that, though hostile, in reality cry out for association with each other."<sup>67</sup>

It is not a coincidence that the "bewilderment" which accompanies the lovers' mutual recognition of their mortality is comparable to the initial powerful acknowledgement of their love. The "bewilderment" of the final stanza is a fearful perplexity that emerges from the mysteriousness of both love and death. Graves implies that this state of rapt confusion cannot be adequately accounted for by philosophical or religious means. I believe that this acceptance of the insufficiency of our contemplative abilities is an achievement which is too easily ignored. First, it is not an altogether negative recognition, if this awareness allows one to appreciate more fully the value of what can be known (cf. Graves's "The Ages of Oath": "Did I forget how to greet plainly/ The especial sight, how to know deeply/ The pleasure shared by upright hearts?" CP 109).

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<sup>67</sup>James Smith, "On Metaphysical Poetry," Selections from Scrutiny vol. 2, ed. F.R. Leavis (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968) 168.



Second, this perception of the inadequacy of reason--as well as of the shortcomings of our more cherished meditative processes--which recurs in Graves's poetry does not at all imply that it is useless, and in fact, it accounts for a scrupulous attention to the use of logic in his poetry, which is a concern which is often disregarded by his more speculative poetic contemporaries.

I shall have more to say about the relationship between "bewilderment" and "acknowledgement" in Graves's poetry in my third chapter; but for the moment it must suffice to say that Graves's struggle to eliminate misleading or false sources of "bewilderment" in his poetry has perhaps made it seem like a retreat from the complexities of modern society rather than an implicit judgement upon them. Probably one of the most widespread misconceptions about Graves's poetry is that the detachment and reasonableness of his poems are achieved without much of an emotional struggle. The emotional tension is certainly there in his greatest poems, but his personal emotions are not as explicitly aligned with metaphysical desires as are the emotions of poets like Eliot and Stevens. For Graves, bewilderment is most often inspired by the nature of one's commitment to one's beloved, or at least to one's ideal of love; while for many of his contemporaries the state of bewilderment is more often inspired by their awareness of the absence of a unifying ontology in the modern world.

I should add that when Graves attempts to give grand-scale, unifying significance to the trials of love in his creation of the White Goddess mythology, he does adopt the sage-like tone (see "To Juan at the Winter Solstice": "There is one story and one story only" CP 137) which he so abhorred in other poets. In his efforts to make all 'true' love experiences fit into this bizarre mixture of savage and chivalric archetypes of sexual love, Graves has unfortunately drawn many critics' attention away from his more successful non-mythical poems. The desire to believe that a poet of Graves's exceptional lyric ability should be capable of even more magnificent achievements when he approaches a more inclusive perspective is understandable,<sup>68</sup> but in Graves's case, we are confronted in the White Goddess poems with an increased elegance embodying a diminished emotional candor. I don't believe that the White Goddess poems are insincere, but in comparison with many of Graves's other poems, they have a tone of self-importance and forced grandeur that invites parody in ways that wouldn't even suggest themselves when

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<sup>68</sup>Stevie Smith's epigram, "To An American Publisher" may well serve to address the greedy expectations of readers and critics:

You say I must write another book? But I've just written this one.  
You liked it so much that's the reason? Read it again then.

Selected Poems, ed. James MacGibbon (Markham: Penguin, 1978) 149.

reading Graves's earlier poems about love.

I hope that my excursion into this major/minor debate has not seemed like a journey destined to bring the reader to a nervously teetering seat on the fence between OGRE-Strand and Pygmy Alley. In my estimation, Graves's rare lucidity and measured passion which bring "heart-rending" good sense to his poems earn him major status, and his achievements as a love poet, certainly put him in the same league as Yeats and Hardy. As I have indicated, Graves has no single work which is as intellectually layered and laden with cultural significance as The Waste Land or Paterson. However, it seems to me that majorness should be a flexible enough term to include poets like Hardy and Graves (and Larkin, for that matter) who have written a substantial body of excellent short poems of "unmistakable originality" and intellectual cogency. One is repeatedly disappointed by critics like George Steiner who begin by enthusiastically praising Graves only to conclude in a condescending manner that "the highest intensities, the outermost splendours of language and emotion seem to me beyond him."<sup>69</sup> In the following chapters, particularly Chapter Three, I will work harder to prove that Graves's best poems hold together in ways that are undeniably splendid and intense.

Since Graves generally rebuked the prophetic mode--with

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<sup>69</sup>George Steiner, "The Genius of Robert Graves" Kenyon Review 22 (1960): 363.

the obvious exception of the Goddess poems--we are stingy in our claims for the greatness of his poetry. As I have indicated, one must be careful when invoking the "standards" of great or major poetry, so that we do not, as the philosopher Marjorie Grene suspected, like Plato transform "standards themselves into self-existent entities, and so solidify them."<sup>70</sup> If standards become too explicit, there is of course the risk that they may become prescriptive and eventually stultifying. Yet the absence of explicit and well-defended standards has left many unsure whether Graves's poised uncluttered style says all that can be clearly said or leaves too much unsaid. If we think of Graves's ambitions in terms of an aerial inventor's urge to build supersonic planes, we can see that Graves has a similar ambition to excel previous "inventions"--to move towards "the yet unsayable" (CP 380). Nevertheless, he has perhaps an even stronger ambition to ensure that he is able to land the poem which he has launched, so that we may dispute whether or not his poems soar, but not that they fly and eventually return to our common earth.

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<sup>70</sup>Marjorie Grene, The Knower and the Known (London: Faber, 1956) 169.

Chapter Two

"Recognizably a Something"  
The Enigma of Plain Writing

Graves's poetry is astonishingly lucid. Yet the explicitness which he most often achieves is not the precise delineation of a highly sophisticated subjective point of view such as one encounters in the poems of, for instance, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop or Dylan Thomas; it is rather the explicitness of one who is highly attentive to the many ways in which his words could be misconstrued. The clarity of Graves's best poems is partly a result of their affinities with the plain style in poetry, a tradition described very economically by Wesley Trimpi as the style in which "the denotative and the connotative most nearly approach each other in the exclusion of irrelevant associations from the context."<sup>1</sup> Graves's ability to exclude irrelevant words and phrases from his poems is formidable, and this process of exclusion--as is also discernible in the work of plain stylists such as Ben Jonson and George Herbert--is much more than an aesthetic concern.

The uncluttered nature of Graves's poems is not, as might be supposed, indebted to the aesthetic prohibitions of the Imagist movement, a movement in which Ezra Pound suggested that the poet "use either no ornament or good ornament,"<sup>2</sup> but rather it is a result of his personal distrust of emotional or intellectual embellishment. This

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<sup>1</sup>Wesley Trimpi, Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1962) ix.

<sup>2</sup>Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts," Imagist Poetry, ed. Peter Jones (Markham: Penguin, 1972) 131.

distrust is a defence against both sentimentality and obscurity, as well as the basis of a refined scepticism which pervades much of his poetry. This scepticism is mitigated by an appealing quality in his poetry which might best be described as a stoic charm--a combination of mature self-denial and winsomeness--which is reminiscent of the non-metaphysical lyric poetry of the Renaissance.

Graves is not a sceptic in the strictly philosophical sense of one "who holds that there are no adequate grounds for certainty as to the truth of any proposition whatsoever" (O.E.D. 1971). His scepticism is based upon a hesitation to accept anything as true which cannot be verified by personal experience. For Graves is alert to the dangers of launching into complex theoretical debates that can all too quickly lead to a loss or desertion of more honest and useful perspectives. An obvious example of his manner of forthright scepticism occurs in the last two stanzas of "The Ages of Oath" (1938):

The lost, the freakish, the unspelt  
 Drew me: for simple sights I had no eye.  
 And did I swear allegiance then  
 To wildness, not (as I thought) to truth--  
 Become a virtuoso, and this also,  
 Later, of simple sights, when tiring  
 Of unicorn and upas?

Did I forget how to greet plainly  
 The especial sight, how to know deeply  
 The pleasure shared by upright hearts?  
 And is this to begin afresh, with oaths  
 On the true book, in the true name,  
 Now stammering out my praise of you,  
 Like a boy owning his first love? (CP 109) (1938)

Despite the slightly forced earnestness, the sense of youthful renewal is movingly delivered in the final simile of the poem: "stammering out my praise of you/ Like a boy owning his first love." Graves consistently tries to eliminate attitudes and theories which tend to distract us from the little that we can "know deeply." The mind's flexibility in devising plausible pretexts for evading the many sombre truths in our daily lives as well as for spoiling the rare joyous ones is a recurrent theme in his poetry. The sceptical turn of mind which directs his writing is expressed in his comments regarding his own practice in the essay "The Making and Marketing of Poetry" (1957): "There are, however, certain sorts of poems which I have taught myself to treat with the greatest suspicion. The self-pitying 'O poor me sort.' The dismal 'isn't everything hell?' sort .... The purely descriptive 'camera study' sort."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to revealing his wariness of the poet's temptation to transform emotionally-based observations into world views, the above quotation shows Graves's distaste for the poetry of detailed description. The relationship between a modern poet's visual perspective and his imaginative grasp of the world around him is one that is

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Graves, "The Making and Marketing of Poetry" in Food For Centaurs (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 127.



extremely important to poets such as Ezra Pound, Keith Douglas, Edward Thomas, T.S. Eliot, Louis MacNeice and Robert Frost. In her examinations of the imagistic bias of most poets during the first half of the twentieth century, Rosemond Tuve remarks: "A fair number of modern poems (some of H.D.'s may occur to the reader) seem to have this end [of exhibiting] the representation of sensuous experience, without comment or other unmistakable indication from the author to the reader of the value of the generalized meaning."<sup>4</sup> There are very few detailed visual observations in Graves's poems, and almost nothing of "the voluptuousness of looking," to borrow a phrase from Mario Rosso which was used as an epigraph to Wallace Stevens's "Evening Without Angels."<sup>5</sup> One rarely encounters visual details of physical particularities in Graves's work like those we find in Pound's lines about dew-soaked "gauze stockings,"<sup>6</sup> or "glare azure of water"<sup>7</sup> and "wine-red glow in the shallows/ a tin flash in the sun dazzle,"<sup>8</sup> or William Carlos

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<sup>4</sup>Rosemond Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1947) 10.

<sup>5</sup>Mario Rosso, quoted in Wallace Stevens, "Evening Without Angels," Poems: Wallace Stevens, ed. and intro. Samuel French Morse (New York: Vintage, 1959) 57.

<sup>6</sup>Ezra Pound, "The Jewelled Stairs' Grievance," Selected Poems of Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions, 1957) 99.

<sup>7</sup>Pound, "Canto II," 99.

<sup>8</sup>Pound, "Canto II," 99.

Williams's description in "Burning the Christmas Greens" of "the jagged flames green/ to red instant and alive" before which the observers stand breathless, "refreshed among the shining fauna of that fire."<sup>9</sup> Graves's virtual elimination of intricate physical description from his poetry is of particular relevance when one attempts to understand his attitudes toward his craft. The most significant reason for his exclusion of luxuriant passages of physical description is clear when one considers his comments on a book of poems by his friend Alun Lewis: "I do like your book, despite the disturbing sensuality which, though appropriate to the time and place of writing, distracts attention from your poetic argument."<sup>10</sup> For Graves, the logical argument of the poem is paramount, and he believes that all other elements of the poem should be subordinated to this aim. The business of knowing is nowhere near as much a matter of sensuous attentiveness for Graves as it is for so many other modern poets such as Pound, Yeats, Williams, Edward Thomas and Eliot.

The attention which Graves gives to the logical arguments in many of his poems contributes to the impressive impersonality of his work. The impersonal tone is often

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<sup>9</sup>William Carlos Williams, "Burning the Christmas Greens," Selected Poems, (New Directions, 1985) 150.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Graves, In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1914-46, ed. Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982) 310.

achieved by a blend of objective and ironic perspectives rather than by a presentation of stridently intellectual and philosophical viewpoints. There is an orderliness in Graves's thinking which reminds one of the meticulously constructed lyrics of the English Renaissance poets. Certain generalizations about Renaissance poetry are readily applicable to Graves's work; a particularly significant example is Rosemund Tuve's observation in Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery that "the linkage of thought which is important in early theory is not between creativeness and self-expression but between creativeness and ordering."<sup>11</sup> Graves is much more concerned with ordering and understanding his experience than with expressing the idiosyncratic subtleties of his personal emotions. His faith in the emotionally regenerative power of one's attempts at ordering one's life is apparent in his letter which responds to a remark made by Alun Lewis about his "simple cosmic loneliness." Graves replies: "Since you are a poet I assume you use the word 'cosmically' literally, the cosmos being the poetic ordering of mere mass; my conviction is that a poet who takes his function seriously and continuously rejects from his life and works everything disorderly finds the friends he needs."<sup>12</sup>

Rejection of that which is disorderly is a substantial

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<sup>11</sup>Tuve, 148

<sup>12</sup>Robert Graves, Selected Letters 1914-46, 305.

aspect of Graves's practice as a poet. The negative emphasis upon the jettisoning of "everything disorderly" as opposed to a more positive emphasis regarding the consolidation of everything orderly is also indicative of his poetic temperament. His relentless revisions of individual poems as well as exclusion of entire poems from successive editions of his collected poems attest to the seriousness with which he views his principle of rejection.<sup>13</sup> A comparison of the original published version of his hygenically macabre "It Was All Very Tidy" (Poems 1926-30) with the revised version from the Collected Poems 1975 serves well as a starting point for an investigation of Graves's techniques of revision.

When I reached his place  
 The grass was smooth,  
 The wind was delicate,  
 The wit well timed,  
 The limbs well formed,  
 The pictures straight on the wall.  
 It was all very tidy.

He was cancelling out

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<sup>13</sup>Determining the precise number of published poems revised by Graves is something of a researcher's nightmare. For example, of the 45 poems in the volume Poems 1926-30, only 27 of these are found in the 1975 Collected Poems and only 3 of these 27 are unrevised. Although most of these 27 have some changes in phrasing, a few have only one or two prepositions or punctuation marks changed. Graves revised less in the last twenty years of his poetic career: this leniency towards his later poetry has done much damage to his reputation, especially given the unjustifiably large area given to his later verse in the latter 350 pages of his 551-page Collected Poems 1975.

The last row of figures,  
 He had his beard tied up in ribbons,  
 There was no dust on his shoe,  
 Everyone laughed.  
 It was all very tidy.

Music was not playing,  
 There were no sudden noises,  
 The sun shone blandly,  
 The clock ticked.  
 It was all very tidy.

"Apart from and above all this,"  
 I reassured myself,  
 "Am I not myself?"  
 It was all very tidy.

Death did not address me,  
 He had nearly done,  
 It was all very tidy.  
 They asked, did I consent  
 It was all very tidy?

I could not bring myself,  
 For shame, to untie  
 His beard's neat ribbons,  
 Or jog his elbow,  
 Or whistle and sing,  
 Or make disaster,  
 I consented, fearfully,  
 He was not unwelcome  
 It was all very tidy.<sup>14</sup>

When I reached his place,  
 The grass was smooth,  
 The wind was delicate,  
 The wit well timed,  
 The limbs well formed,  
 The pictures straight on the wall:  
 It was all very tidy.

He was cancelling out  
 The last row of figures,  
 He had his beard tied up in ribbons,  
 There was no dust on his shoe,  
 Everyone nodded:  
 It was all very tidy.

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<sup>14</sup>Robert Graves, "It Was All Very Tidy," Poems 1926-30  
 (London: Heinemann, 1931) 84.

Music was not playing,  
 There were no sudden noises,  
 The sun shone blandly,  
 The clock ticked:  
 It was all very tidy.

'Apart from and above all this,'  
 I reassured myself,  
 'There is now myself.'  
 It was all very tidy.

Death did not address me,  
 He had nearly done:  
 It was all very tidy.  
 They asked, did I not think  
 It was all very tidy?

I could not bring myself  
 To laugh, or untie  
 His beard's neat ribbons,  
 Or jog his elbow,  
 Or whistle, or sing,  
 Or make disturbance.  
 I consented, frozenly.  
 He was unexceptionable:  
 It was all very tidy. (CP 49)

The transformation of the folk tradition which personifies death as the grim reaper into death as the prim accountant is marvellously apt, considering the way in which we are now more likely to deal with death in bureaucratic than in agrarian terms. The order, or in this case, the tidiness, with which Graves is concerned is treated with an irony which emerges from the terseness of the poem's structure. The brevity of the line lengths is essential to its chilling effect: there is no place for langorous reflection or banter in the forbiddingly efficient setting

described in the poem.<sup>15</sup>

The revisions to the first three stanzas are marginal. Replacing the period with a colon in the penultimate line of each stanza does, however, does give a little more emphasis to the summarizing nature of the refrain, and the replacement of "laughed" with the more obedient and solemn "nodded" manages to add to the humourlessness of the situation. These small changes are indicative of most of the subsequent changes in the poem. Graves attempts to eliminate any awkward and indiscreet words or phrases which interfere with its mutedly sinister tone.

The fourth stanza contains the first major readjustment of the poem, where the slightly indignant and uncalled-for question, "Am I not myself?" is changed to the blandly self-evident statement 'There is now myself,' which hints at the sense of ineffectuality felt by the speaker. This change from a question to a statement reveals the attempt by the speaker to repress his frustration and fear. Also, the phrase 'There is now myself' does not imply the by this

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<sup>15</sup>The mixture of the smirkingly comic and the flatly solemn in this poem may owe something to the out-of-kilterness between form and content, a quality perceptively noted by Albert J. Guerard of one of Graves's most powerful mentors, Thomas Hardy. Guerard observes that "a peculiar effect may derive, for instance, from a sharp discrepancy between nominal feeling and surface form; between very plain diction and highly ornamented stanzas or elaborate meter; between simple gravity of theme and a form intrinsically light or even playful." "The Illusion of Simplicity: The Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy," Sewanee Review (1964) 72: 367.

point irrelevant question of one's personal identity as does "Am I not myself?" Instead, in the revised version we have a feeble proposition about the speaker's existence which is so serenely threatened. Graves delicately modifies the politely officious and condescending nature of "they" by replacing "They asked, did I consent/ It was all very tidy?" with "They asked, did I not think/ It was all very tidy?" This change also implies that it would be impudent, or perhaps plainly unreasonable, for the speaker to think otherwise.

The most significant and satisfying revisions are made in the final stanza, which now reads,

I could not bring myself  
To laugh, or untie  
His beard's neat ribbons,  
Or jog his elbow,  
Or whistle, or sing,  
Or make disturbance.  
I consented, frozenly.  
He was unexceptionable:  
It was all very tidy.

Firstly, Graves removes the limiting and unresonant emotive terms "shame" and "fearfully." The feeling of fear is rendered more effectively by the hesitant rhythms of the lines which are now devoid of any overt statement of the speaker's emotions. His shame and fear are displayed by his inability to perform any of the small gestures of casual levity and irreverence. The overemphatic and unsuitable "make disaster" is replaced by the more appropriate "make disturbance," which aptly recalls the absence of music and



"no sudden noises" mentioned in stanza three. Moreover, the speaker obviously no longer sees himself as capable of making anything as powerful as "disaster," let alone "disturbance." The horrified inactivity and helplessness of the speaker is conveyed much more effectively by the replacement of "fearfully" with "frozenly."

The most breathtaking revision in the poem is clearly Graves's replacement of "not unwelcome" with "unexceptionable." "Not unwelcome"--apart from reminding one of George Orwell's observation that "banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the 'not un-' formation"<sup>16</sup>-- is inappropriate to the emotional tenor of the poem, since it merely implies that Death wasn't quite welcome. In order to regard this phrase as a proper culmination to the chilling mood of the preceding stanzas, we must read it as being extremely ironic. Otherwise, the phrase implies a sense of resignation and invitation on the part of the speaker which is not in keeping with either the tone or the setting of the poem which opens with the poet arriving at "[Death's] place." "Unexceptionable" is such a satisfying revision because it means both "To whom, or to which no exception can be taken; perfectly satisfactory or adequate" and, more rarely, "Admitting of no exception" (O.E.D. 1971). The efficiency of the clerk-like Death is

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<sup>16</sup>George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in Inside the Whale and Other Essays (Markham: Penguin, 1962) 147.

certainly "unexceptionable" in the first sense, and the fact that no one is exempt from Death's tally makes the word doubly meaningful. It is notable that Graves manages to avoid the Modernist penchant for glaring ambiguity in his choice of "unexceptionable," since the dual senses of the word tend to complement each other in the context of the poem rather than suggest widely alternative readings. The poem's grim tone of knowingness and menacing finality is also reinforced by this word choice in that it emphasizes the futility of one's objections to death, no matter how passionately one might want to present one's own sense of being an exception.

The types of changes which Graves makes to "It Was All Very Tidy" are fairly representative examples of his most frequent strategies of revision to his published poems. His modifications are less reorderings of whole sections of a poem's structure than they are adjustments to local discrepancies of word choice and tone. The figure of Death, for example, does not operate like a symbol which represents any number of meanings, but is rather cut out like a sharp-edged silhouette.

Graves's preference for emblematic imagery has been discussed by Donald Davie in his 1960 article entitled "Impersonal and Emblematic." Davie asserts that the difference between a symbol and an emblem is that "the symbol casts a shadow, where the emblem doesn't; the symbol

aims to be suggestive, the emblem to be, even in its guise as riddle, ultimately explicit."<sup>17</sup> If one examines "A Love Story," for instance, it becomes apparent that the "full moon" mentioned in the poem does not resound with the almost inexhaustible suggestiveness of a symbol:

The full moon easterly rising, furious,  
 Against a winter sky ragged with red;  
 The hedges high in snow, and owls raving--  
 Solemnities not easy to withstand:  
 A shiver wakes the spine.

In boyhood, having encountered the scene,  
 I suffered horror: I fetched the moon home,  
 With owls and snow, to nurse in my head  
 Throughout the trials of a new Spring,  
 Famine unassuaged.

But fell in love, and made a lodgement  
 Of love on these chill ramparts.  
 Her image was my ensign: snows melted,  
 Hedges sprouted, the moon tenderly shone,  
 The owls trilled with tongues of nightingale.

These were all lies, though they matched the time,  
 And brought me less than luck: her image  
 Warped in the weather, turned beldamish.  
 Then back came winter on me at a bound,  
 The pallid sky heaved with a moon-quake.

Dangerous it had been with love-notes  
 To serenade Queen Famine.  
 In tears I recomposed the former scene,  
 Let the snow lie, watched the moon rise, suffered the  
 owls  
 Paid homage to them of unevent. (CP 121)

The speaker describes the moon in three distinct ways, without his really trying to integrate these different representations. In the first two stanzas, the full moon is "easterly rising, furious," and inspires solemn horror and

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<sup>17</sup>Donald Davie, "Impersonal and Emblematic," Shennandoah 13 (1962): 40.

feelings of unfulfillment. Next, the moon shines with a sympathetic glamour in stanza three. Finally, after a brief return to its "furious" state, as it quakes during the speaker's disillusioning experiences, it becomes an image of bland indifference, of "unevent." There do not seem to be any overt connections made by the speaker between his distinct impressions of the moon; neither are they seen as overlapping, since one emblematic representation simply replaces the other.

This poem is especially curious because it reveals the slipperiness of the distinctions which are often drawn between emblems and symbols.<sup>18</sup> One could understandably contend that the moon described in "A Love Story" functions

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The most illuminating article which I have read regarding this thorny topic is D. W. Harding's "Concrete Embodiment: Emblem and Symbol" in his Experience Into Words: Essays on Poetry (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963). The contrast Harding makes between emblem and symbol is "between a representation that stands for something clearly definable and one that stands for something of which the general nature is evident but the precise range and boundaries of meaning are not readily specified, perhaps not usefully specified." (74) He also points out that "if the event [an author] uses is only an emblem both he and the reader will know pretty clearly what it means and what it does not mean. They can translate it. The meaning is detachable from the object or event that represents it. If it is in any sense a symbol we may neither of us, reader or author, be confident in detaching a limited, translatable meaning." (79)

Rosemary Freeman makes a similar point when referring to George Herbert's poetry in English Emblem Books (New York: Octagon Books, 1966). She observes that the emblematic quality of Herbert's imagery "reflects, in fact, a constant readiness to see a relation between simple, concrete visible things and moral ideas, and to establish the relation in as complete a way as possible without identifying the two or blurring the outlines of either." 155.

more as an evocatively and thematically inclusive symbol of the changeableness of romantic love. Such a case for the symbolic power of the moon in this poem has been made by Michael Kirkham:

Though the moon appears only in her baleful aspect, that aspect can be seen to form part of a whole coherent reality. The 'solemnities' described in the first stanza, the moon rising against the angry red of a wintry sunset, belong to one phase of the moon and one time of the year; the poem's conclusion, in which the poet resigns himself to the moon's control of the 'phases' of his experience, hints at other 'phases' and the need to wait patiently for them.<sup>19</sup>

Although Kirkham's analysis of this poem is perfectly reasonable in the context of Graves's development of the moon-goddess associations involved with the White Goddess, there are no overt indications in this particular poem inviting us to consider specifically the 'phases' of the moon. It is tempting to interpret "Queen Famine" as being one of the moodier incarnations of the White Goddess, but this poem, in my opinion, neither requires nor substantially benefits from that kind of elaboration. If Graves wanted the reader to consider the different phases of the moon, he would probably have included a description of say, a less "furious" quarter moon in order to establish a contrast. Moreover, the "full moon" in the first stanza is the dominant image of the moon throughout the poem; hence the

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<sup>19</sup>Michael Kirkham, The Poetry of Robert Graves (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) 180.

second stanza refers to "having encountered the scene," and the final stanza mentions the reappearance of "the former scene." Even though a merging of these images in the reader's mind might lead him to conceive of the moon in all of its evocative power as a symbol, the moon in each different section of the poem operates more as a fixed emblem; the speaker's inability to see the rigidity of making his beloved's image his "ensign" is reflected by the discrete emblematic conceptions he has of the moon.

I believe that Graves employs emblematic imagery in a very deliberate manner, but, unlike critics such as Donald Davie and Ronald Hayman, I do not believe that his use--or over-use--of emblems betokens any disastrous limitations in his poetic thought. Davie argues:

When Graves tries, as he does quite often, to render experiences of nightmare obsession and anxiety, of self-disgust or the fear of madness, his dry and definite technique fails him; and we get the disconcerting effect of a nicely adjusted and chiselled frame about a vaporous centre. The much admired "Nature's Lineaments" seems a case of this, and "Welsh Incident" virtually admits as much.<sup>20</sup>

Hayman's criticism is a more all-encompassing indictment of Graves's procedures:

In all too many of Graves's poems, the experience is so externalised in the process of judging it that the poetry is stiffened almost into satire. The energy is diverted into clever construction, and equilibrium between the meanings of the parts becoming more apparent and more important than the

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<sup>20</sup>Donald Davie, "Impersonal," 41.



Who else was present? How was the weather?'  
 'I was coming to that. It was half-past three  
 On Easter Tuesday last. The sun was shining.  
 The Harlech Silver Band played Marchog Jesu  
 On thirty-seven shimmering instruments,  
 Collecting for Caernarvon's (Fever) Hospital Fund.  
 The populations of Pwllheli, Criccieth,  
 Portmdoc, Borth, Tremadoc, Penryhyndeudraeth,  
 Were all assembled. Criccieth's mayor addressed them  
 First in good Welsh and then in fluent English,  
 Twisting his fingers in his chain of office,  
 Welcoming the things. They came out on the sand,  
 Not keeping time to the band, moving seaward  
 Silently at a snail's pace. But at last  
 The most odd, indescribable thing of all,  
 Which hardly one man there could see for wonder,  
 Did something recognizably a something.'  
 'Well, what?'

'It made a noise.'

'A frighening noise?'

'No, no.'

'A musical noise? A noise of scuffling?'

'No, but a very loud, respectable noise--  
 Like groaning to oneself on Sunday morning  
 In Chapel, close before the second psalm.'

'What did the mayor do?'

'I was coming to that.'

(CP 71)

"Welsh Incident" is cleverly farcical in demonstrating the limitations of language; the failure to describe the "queer things" is exactly the point of the poem. Consequently, we discover more about the speaker and his interlocutor than we do about the "utterly peculiar/ Things." The art of conversational storytelling, including all of its opportunities for digressions, scene setting, and dramatized bewilderment, as well as the impatient curiosity of the listener, are more important to the effect of "Welsh Incident" than the "things" themselves. Graves is careful to show that the poem is supposedly part of a longer yarn by beginning with "But that was nothing to what things came



out/ From the sea caves," and concluding with the mildly irritated retort of the storyteller, "I was coming to that."

Instead of being a failure to "render experiences," "Welsh Incident" operates as a parable of our most basic methods of description and investigation. Kirkham sees the poem as being fairly uninteresting, commenting that "the mythical creatures are evidently a disrespectful embodiment of the poet's non-conformism"<sup>22</sup> while, Carter, more generously acknowledges that "the whole purpose of the conversation, each side accepts, is to keep it going, and not allow logic or time the triumph of a conclusion."<sup>23</sup> Once it is established that the "things" do not fit into any existing categories of mysterious or fanciful beings such as ghosts or mermaids, there is a frustrated attempt to describe them in terms of their substance, proportion, and resemblance to each other. The nationalistic narrow-mindedness that one might initially find implied in the comment that the "things" were "Very strange, un-Welsh" is somewhat mitigated by the speaker's subsequent observations that some of the things were "no sizes" and "no color." Even though the "things" in the poem bear almost no resemblance to humans, it is difficult for the speaker to discard all expectations that they ought to exhibit some human behaviour, as Graves amusingly conveys in the

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<sup>22</sup>Kirkham, 130.

<sup>23</sup>Carter, 170.

observation: "They came out on the sand,/ Not keeping time to the band."

This process of trying to describe something by ascertaining what it is not is extremely important in understanding Graves's activity as a poet. The preponderance of the prefix un- throughout his poetry attests to his fascination with negations, omissions, and reversals of our habitual expectations. Some of his most striking lines are created by his ability to negate an idea or action while simultaneously reminding us of its possibility. This tactic is evident in the lines: "So each new victim treads unflinching/ The never altered circuit of his fate" ("To Juan at the Winter Solstice" CP 137). The trepidation that we might normally associate with the progress of a knowing "victim" is implied and yet denied by the use of the adverb "unflinching." Thus Graves creates a tension between the idea that the victim may have good cause to falter and the knowledge that he is part of an inexorable cycle. Graves is of course not the only poet to use negative constructions in a memorable fashion--Auden's "sing of human unsuccess," Yeats's "their unremembering hearts and heads," and Larkin's "where my childhood was unspent" come to mind--yet the variety of effects that he achieves through his frequent use of the single prefix is so large that it is worth citing a number of characteristic examples:

Let us observe with what uncommon sense ("Alice" CP 32)

Paid homage to them of unevent ("A Love Story" CP 121)

Guard unequivocal silence/ Lest you discuss wisdom in  
the language of unwisdom ("Gold and Malachite" CP 308)

Till there seemed nothing but ungivable pride/ That yet  
remained ungiven ("Pure Death" CP 48)

On an uncoasted, featureless/ And barren ocean of blue  
stretch ("The Furious Voyage" CP 53)

Learn in due time to walk at greater length/ And more  
unanswerably ("The Philosopher" CP 81)

The lost, the freakish, the unspelt,/ Drew me ("The  
Ages of Oath" CP 113)

He was unexceptionable ("It Was All Very Tidy" CP 50)

Ours is uncalendered love ("Uncalendered Love" CP 228)

Holding the histories of the night/ In yet unmelted  
tracks ("Like Snow" CP 111)

What have they said? Or unsaid? ("Frightened Men" CP  
128)

By his UnServicelike, familiar ways, Sir,/ He made the  
whole Fleet love him, damn his eyes ("1805" CP 145)

Lurking unforgotten,/ Unrestrainable endless grief  
("The Haunted House" CP 4)

Pain, that unpurposed, matchless elemental ("Surgical  
Ward: Men" CP 219)

From the unsaid to the yet unsayable/ In silence of  
love and love's temerity ("The Yet Unsayable" CP 380)

The importance of Graves's use of the prefix un-, as well as the related suffix -less, is stressed not only by the frequency of their appearance but also by the attention which he gives to such matters in his revisions. The first published version of "The Philosopher," for instance, which was originally entitled "The Cell" (Poems 1930-33) is

changed from "Learn in due time to walk more accurately / And neatly than at home"<sup>24</sup> to "Learn in due time to walk at greater length/ And more unanswerably," which better emphasizes the exasperating air of immunity from the mundane and bothersome details of everyday life that may be arrogantly assumed by a thinker given to excessive use of abstractions.

Despite the affected and formulary tone that could invade Graves's work through his frequent use of negative constructions, one must not overlook the relation between this procedure and Graves's pervasive concern with the boundaries and limitations of thought and action. It is to ignore, I believe, one of the interesting ways in which a small effect can make a whole poem more compelling. The unexpected use of a prefix such as "un-" can be a way of delightfully inverting our customary perception of a word or phrase, causing us to be more alert to its relation to the poem as a whole. A wonderful example of this occurs in "Alice" (CP 31) where Graves celebrates Alice's "uncommon sense," a phrase which awakens us to the value, and the seldomly acknowledged rarity, of such level-headedness. The phrase doesn't so much tell us something that we didn't think we knew already as it serves to remind us that the fundamental importance of what we loosely call common sense

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<sup>24</sup>Robert Graves, "The Cell," Poems 1930-33 (London: A. Barker, 1933) 6.

is too readily forgotten when we are faced with novel situations. In "Alice," Graves invites one to consider how the adherence to good sense may keep one from being entrapped in nonsensical formulations without having to discountenance the odder manifestations of the imagination as completely worthless or distressingly hostile.

An obvious advantage of attaching "un-" to a word which has a more commonly used antonym (e.g., using "unwisdom" instead of "foolishness") is that it may temporarily stall the habitual speed at which one reads--in Graves's case, at least--fairly uncomplicated poetic expression. Meter, syntax, rhyme and line-length are essential in discerning the approximate physical tempo of a poem; yet when a poet who uses mostly plain vocabulary and traditional meters inserts an unusual word, what might be called the cognitive tempo of the line may be forced into a slight lag, thus causing the reader to think more carefully about the apparent "simplicity" of the surrounding sections of the poem. The use of surprising "un-" constructions is not a startling innovation of Graves's, yet the acknowledgement of his interest in this practice does help one to see, among other things, a tangible and illuminating affinity between his work and the work of two of his strongest poetic influences, Thomas Hardy and Laura Riding.

Although Riding's and Hardy's world views have roughly as much in common as those of a mutant priestess from Borax-

5 and a municipal clerk, both of them do share a fancy for using "un-" constructions in marvellously compelling ways. Riding tends to use them in order to explore bizarre paradoxes, as one can infer from lines such as

Talk is the body of the listener  
That has its own long talk to walk  
Before it comes where the mind rests  
To hear without an ear  
The unhearable words of no-talk.<sup>25</sup>

From unlove of the sun, by one more glance,  
Sudden-small to more true-fine,  
Comes unlife of earth: oh learn  
Lest unlife of earth be in you. (CP 212)

The unsympathetic reader may feel that she writes from such an intransigently individualistic perspective that it is not really worth deciphering her gnomic utterances, but there are instances where Riding's deployment of "un-" constructions for expressing paradoxes is more incisive, as in the lines from "Room": "The unborn beggars cry 'Unfed' / Until all are born and dead" (CP 44).

Hardy's uses of the "un-" prefix are often as unusual as Riding's, but needless to say, they are used within far less perplexing contexts. His uses of the prefix often elucidate a sense of loss, absence, inability, or thwarted expectations and aspirations rather than ontological cruxes. The frustrated attempt to envision the final years of a long-departed lover is stunningly depicted in the lines from

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<sup>25</sup>Laura (Riding) Jackson, The Collected Poems of Laura Riding (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980) 76. All subsequent quotations from Riding's poetry will be taken from this text.

"Thoughts of Phena": "And in vain do I urge my unsight/ To  
conceive my lost prize/ At her close."<sup>26</sup> Other  
representative examples of Hardy's uses of "un-" include:  
"And why unblooms the best hope ever sown" (CP vol. I, 10);  
"For iife I never cared greatly/ As worth a man's while,/ Peradventures  
unsought,/ Peradventures that ended in nought/  
Had kept me from youth and through manhood till lately/  
Unwon by its style" (CP vol. II, 288); "No God nor Demon can  
undo the done/ Unsight the seen,/ Make muted music unbegun"  
(CP vol. II, 16); "The mightiest moments pass uncalendered"  
(CP vol. I, 115); "so the poor device/ Of homely wording I  
could tolerate,/ Knowing its unadornment held as freight/  
The sweetest image outside Paradise" (CP vol. I, 38).

A consideration of this confluence of two such  
disparate poets upon Graves's poetry may assist us in  
understanding the often remarked quirky texture of some of  
Graves's poems. "Interruption" is an example of one of  
Graves's more enigmatic poems which seems to combine  
elements from both Hardy's and Riding's poetry. The poem  
opens with a description of an impending intrusion which  
slowly encroaches upon an idly contemplative state of mind:

If ever against this easy blue and silver  
Hazed-over countryside of thoughtfulness,  
Far behind in the mind and above,  
Boots from before and below approach trampling,

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<sup>26</sup>Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy, vol. I, ed. Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 84. All subsequent quotations from Hardy's poetry will be taken from this edition.

Watch how their premonition will display  
 A forward countryside, low in the distance--  
 A picture-postcard square of June grass;  
 Will warm a summer season, trim the hedges,  
 Cast the river about on either flank,  
 Start the late cuckoo emptily calling,  
 Invent a rambling tale of moles and voles,  
 Furnish a path with stiles.  
 Watch how the field will broaden, the feet nearing,  
 Sprout with great dandelions and buttercups,  
 Widen and heighten. The blue and silver  
 Fogs at the boarder of this all-grass.  
 Interruption looms gigantified,  
 Lurches against, treads thundering through,  
 Elots the landscape, scatters all,  
 Roars and rumbles like a dark tunnel,  
 Is gone.

The picture-postcard grass and trees  
 Swim back to central: it is a large patch,  
 It is a modest, failing patch of green,  
 The postage-stamp of its departure,  
 Clouded with blue and silver, closing in now  
 To a plain countryside of less and less,  
 Unpeopled and unfeatured blue and silver,  
 Before, behind, above. (CP 73)

The utter vacancy of the initially "easy blue and silver"  
 terrain of "thoughtfulness" is not really conveyed until the  
 bland desolation of the mental landscape is described as  
 "Unpeopled and unfeatured."

One is certainly unlikely to glance at "Interruption"  
 and be immediately reminded of Hardy, but the movement of  
 the poem--proceeding from the mind to the external world and  
 then into an imaginative rumination followed by a revelation  
 which somehow dispels the meditative state, leaving one at  
 last with a re-establishment of the opening scene of the  
 poem--is similar to that of Hardy's "The Pedigree" (CP vol.  
 II, 197). The elusive nature of thoughtfulness is also  
 reminiscent of Riding's poem "Hospitality to Words" (CP 76).



While these three poems are by no means variations on a similar theme, an examination of their shared qualities may help us to understand what makes certain of Graves's poems seem so peculiar. Let us first examine Hardy's poem:

I bent in the deep of night  
 Over a pedigree the chronicler gave  
 As mine; and as I bent there, half-unrobed,  
 The uncurtained panes of my window-square let in the  
     watery light  
 Of the moon in its old age:  
 And green-rheumed clouds were hurrying past where mute  
 and cold it globed  
 Like a drifting dolphin's eye seen through a lapping  
     wave.

So, scanning my sire-sown tree,  
 And the hieroglyphs of this spouse tied to that,  
 With offspring mapped below in lineage,  
 Till the tangles troubled me,  
 The branches seemed to twist into a seared and cynic  
     face  
 Which winked and tokened towards the window like a Mage  
 Enchanting me to gaze thereat.

It was a mirror now,  
 And in its long perspective I could trace  
 Of my begetters, dwindling backward each past each  
 All with the kindred look,  
 Whose names had since been inked down in their place  
 On the recorder's book,  
 Generation and generation of my mien, and build, and  
     brow.

And then did I divine  
 That every heave and coil and move I made  
 Within my brain, and in my mood and speech,  
 Was in the glass portrayed  
 As long forestalled by their so making it;  
 The first of them, the primest fuglemen of my line,  
 Being fogged in far antiqueness past surmise and  
     reason's reach.

Said I then, sunk in tone,  
 'I am merest mimicker and counterfeit!'  
 Though thinking, 'I am I,  
And what I do I do myself alone.'  
 --The cynic twist of the page thereat unknit  
 Back to its normal figure, having wrought its purport

wry,  
 The Mage's mirror left the window square,  
 And the stained moon and drift retook their places  
 there.

Hardy's poem is a shaping of the associative and logical processes of the mind; it does not seem to impose an overly rigid structure upon the thoughts, although the setting of the scene in the opening stanza and the return to this same external scene in the closing stanza do give the poem a firm sense of wholeness or at least a certain completedness. The tone is very familiar, like that of one who invites us to follow his every turn of thought and his attendant emotional responses.<sup>27</sup>

Graves's poem is also concerned with the movement from one thought to the next, yet there are no explicit emotive phrases like Hardy's "the tangles troubled me" and "Said I then, sunk in tone." In "Interruption," we are presented more with a half-objectified concept of "thoughtfulness"

<sup>27</sup>I should add that the differences between Hardy and Graves are as illuminating as their similarities. For instance, both Graves and Hardy are very sparing in their use of metaphors. One of the reasons for the rarity of metaphors in Hardy's poems is suggested by Samuel Hynes in his observation of Hardy's admiration for George Crabbe: "Perhaps [Crabbe] felt that metaphors assumed connections in the world too easily, took for granted a universe of ordered and significant relationships, whereas Hardy was only sure of the reality of the physical world that he could see, and of his own feelings and memories. And he kept his poems-- the best of them, at least--faithful to his sense of reality, even at the expense of figurative power." "The Hardy Tradition in Modern English Poetry" in Thomas Hardy: The Writer and His Background, ed. Norman Page (New York: St. Martins, 1980) 181.

than with the thoughtful processes of a specific person involved in thinking about a particular problem. There is nothing of Hardy's poetic persona "half-unrobed" "in the deep of night" pouring over a document and gazing searchingly out of his window. In fact, there is not even an "I" in Graves's poem; we are simply told, without really any sense of being adjured or startled, to "Watch."

One might therefore claim that the tone of "Interruption" is impersonal, but that would not do justice to its uniquely controlled style. Laura Riding seems to have influenced Graves in his development away from the use of an overly self-dramatizing "I." It is somewhat ironic, however, that despite Riding's excision of any lyric or dramatic personae from many of her poems, one nonetheless often feels the strong presence of her intellectual personality behind her ostensibly impersonal poetic utterance. Consider, for example, the characteristically confounding "Hospitality to Words":

The small the far away  
 The unmeant meanings  
 Of sincere conversation  
 Encourage the common brain of talkers  
 And steady the cup-handles on the table.  
 Over the rims the drinking eyes  
 Taste close congratulation  
 And are satisfied.

Happy room, meal of securities,  
 The fire distributes feelings,  
 The cross-beam showers down centuries.  
 How mad for friendliness  
 Creep words from where they shiver and starve,  
 Untalkative and outcast. (CP 76)

In the preface to her Collected Poems 1938, Riding insists that a "corruption of the reasons for poetry sets in--in both the reader and the poet--when too much emphasis is laid upon assisting the reader" (CP 408); and this is--in theory, at any rate--an important and respectable guideline. However, Riding's refusal to offer "too much" assistance within the poem to the reader is probably more likely to lead one in search of other sources, such as her prose treatises, in order to illuminate the intensely paradoxical texture of her poetry. There may be no explicit "I" in "Hospitality to Words," but it is difficult not to feel that it is so enigmatic because it is so idiosyncratic, so markedly a product of a singular, and perhaps unfathomable, personality. Riding has taken the inherent meaning of her poem for granted, to the extent that we must either accept the existence of words which are "small and far away in thought" or simply deny their possibility: there seems to be no room for disputation with anything that is stated in her poem because everything seems to depend on such a personal vision of reality.<sup>28</sup> For instance, are we meant to understand words and phrases like "sincere," "common brain,"

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<sup>28</sup>Riding's frequent inscrutability seems to be at least partially the result of a desire to convey a sense of being which normally eludes even our poetic uses of language. Much of her poetry reads like a struggle to disprove Ludwig Wittgenstein's statement: "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent." Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1981) 27.

and "satisfied" as being ironic?

As unusual as Graves's "countryside of thoughtfulness/  
Far behind in the mind and above" may be, it is not as  
precisely inexplicit as "The small the far away/ The  
unmeant meanings/ Of sincere conversation." A countryside  
is understandably perceived in terms of its stretching into  
the distance, as "Far behind" could imply, and one is very  
likely to consider the sky ("above") in this view.  
Riding's poem reads like an arcane commentary on pre-  
established ideas, whereas Graves's renders a process of  
thought for our examination. Graves has managed to  
objectify an inner experience by appealing to fairly  
commonplace images--"A picture-postcard square of June  
grass"--which allows us to focus on the activity of the mind  
which will "warm a summer season"; "Cast the river"; "Start  
the late cuckoo"; "Invent a rambling tale"; and "Furnish a  
path." In this poem, Graves may not give the impression  
that one is listening to the personal expression of a  
sensitive and imaginative individual, as one feels when  
reading the Hardy poem, but neither does he present himself  
as an aloof and arcane commentator, as Riding does in her  
poem. Instead, Graves seems to achieve a synthesis of  
Hardy's generous fascination with expressing the movements  
of one's thoughts and Riding's stringent reluctance to  
identify too strongly with a disingenuous poetic persona.

"Interruption" exemplifies Graves's removal of the

distracting emotional and intellectual extremes of personality from a poem. We are not explicitly informed that the "premonition" of "boots from before and below" will inspire a state of pleasant anticipation; rather, Graves draws our attention to the way in which a series of images is prompted by these feelings which accompany the premonition. The indifference of the interruptor is better rendered by emphasizing its active effects upon the mental landscape where it "Lurches against,/ Treads thundering through" and "Blots" and "scatters" instead of describing the agent of the interruption.

Graves's tact in knowing how to divest so many of his best poems of any unnecessary personal mannerisms seems to be partly related to his attitude toward his audience. Donald Davie, in his 1959 article, "The Toneless Voice of Robert Graves," suggests that with other modern poets such as Yeats, Auden, Empson, and Larkin, "to begin appreciating [them] by defining their tone is often to go to the heart of the matter at once. With Mr. Graves it will take us nowhere. For the tone is not there to be defined."<sup>29</sup> Davie's first mistake is in presuming that there is only one tone throughout Graves's poetry. While it is true that Graves rarely presents his speakers as anything as identifiable as the brooding sage of Yeats's "I pace upon

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<sup>29</sup>Donald Davie, "The Toneless Voice of Robert Graves," Listner 2 July (1959): 11.

the battlements and stare," or the coy voyeur of Auden's "O splendid person, you who stand/ In spotless flannels or with hand/ Expert on trigger;/ Whose lovely hair and shapely limb/ Year after year are kept in trim,"<sup>30</sup> it does not mean that his poems are "toneless." Davie has acknowledged a distinctive--but difficult to define--aspect of some of Graves's poetry, but he does not provide a very detailed explanation of what he refers to as the nonsensical position of discussing Graves's "toneless" tone. There is not so much an absence of tone in Graves's poems, as there is a slightly disturbing, perhaps because so rare, presence of an unassumingly confident and relaxed tone in some of them.<sup>31</sup> The proud but not arrogant tone of Graves's best poems seems to owe something to the attitude expressed towards his poetry in the final pages of his autobiography, Goodbye To All That:

I published a volume of poems every year from 1920 to 1925; after The Pierglass, which appeared in 1921, I made no attempt to please the ordinary reading public, and did not even flatter myself that I was conferring benefits on posterity; I had no reason to suppose that posterity would be more appreciative than my contemporaries. I never wrote unless a poem pressed to be written. Though assuming a reader of intelligence and sensibility, and

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<sup>30</sup>W. H. Auden, "A Communist To Others," in Poetry of the Thirties ed. and introd. Robin Skelton (Markham: Penguin, 1964) 55.

<sup>31</sup>Graves's particular brand of confidence is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

envisaging his possible reactions to my words, I no longer identified him with any particular group of readers or (taking courage from Hardy) with critics of poetry. He was no more real a person than the conventional figure put in the foreground of an architectural design to indicate the size of a building.<sup>32</sup>

Like the best of the plain stylists such as Jonson, Herrick and Landor, Graves endeavored to resist the alluring temptation to write for either a highly sophisticated audience or for a cosily appreciative one, thereby allowing himself to be more ardently attentive to his matter than his manner. It may be for this reason that so many of Graves's poems have a polished appearance that does not strike one as merely a veneer of cleverness (as do some of the more decorous sonnets of Sidney, or many of Auden's later poems).

One of the quirkiest aspects of Graves's confident tone is the occasional sprightliness which accompanies this confidence even when he is writing of potentially mind-boggling subjects. In "Lost Acres," for instance, Graves displays the frustration that we may experience when we feel there is something missing between the imaginary borders of our thought-processes, a phenomenon which might send many people in search of an understanding of our subconscious states in the hope that such elusive mental territory might be scientifically and methodically charted. Yet this frustration is characterized in surprisingly matter-of-fact

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<sup>32</sup>Robert Graves, Goodbye To All That (New York: Doubleday, 1929, rev. 1957) 320-21.



terms:

These acres, always again lost  
 By every new ordnance-survey  
 And searched for at exhausting cost  
 Of time and thought are still away.

They have their paper-substitute--  
 Intercalation of an inch  
 At the so-many-thousandth foot--  
 And no one parish feels the pinch.

But lost they are despite all care,  
 And perhaps likely to be bound  
 Together in a piece somewhere,  
 A plot of undiscovered ground.

Invisible, they have the spite  
 To swerve the tautest measuring-chain  
 And the exact theodolite  
 Perched every side of them in vain.

Yet, be assured, we have no need  
 To plot these acres of the mind  
 With prehistoric fern and reed  
 And monsters such as heroes find.

Maybe they have their flowers, their birds,  
 Their trees behind the phantom fence,  
 But of a substance without words:  
 To walk there would be loss of sense. (CP 76)

One might expect a more anguished and tormented tone from one who recognizes the unaccountable nature of the human consciousness, perhaps something like the torment described in G. M. Hopkins's "O the mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ Frightful, no-man-fathomed."<sup>33</sup> Instead of dashing headlong into the chasms of uncharted mind-space, Graves prefers to acknowledge that these areas have an existence of their own which is neither quantifiable nor discussible in

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<sup>33</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins, "No worst, there is none," Selected Poems and Prose, ed. and introd. W. H. Gardner (Markham: Penguin, 1953) 61.

any ordinary terms. The ineffectuality of our supposedly precise instruments and measurements is wittily circumscribed in the fourth stanza. Just as the measuring-chain and theodolite are far from useless, even if they cannot account for absolutely every missing portion of the landscape, so too are language and logic extremely useful despite their often puzzling limitations. The discovery that there are aspects of the mind which are no less real simply because they escape our efforts to convert them into workable linguistic and logical paradigms does not become an occasion for despair in the poem. The tone of the lines, "Yet, be assured, we have no need/ To plot these acres of the mind" is that of someone who is giving advice which has come from repeated experience; it is not the voice of one who is defeated and who arrogantly wishes to discourage others or who tries to gain sympathy for his noble failure. The bemused tone of the poem is a result of the poet's observation that these acres are "always again lost," implying that the tendency to renew one's search repeatedly is both natural and necessary before one can begin to really understand the futility of one's determination to "plot these acres." That Graves directs this advice as much to himself as to others is evident in his revision of the Poems 1926-30 version which reads "Yet there's no scientific need" to "Yet, be assured, we have no need" in the Collected Poems 1938 version. Instead of dismissing a generalized method of

scientific enquiry as irrelevant, Graves's revision more pointedly directs his comments towards himself and those of us who might try to use vaguely scientific methods without due discrimination and skill.

Graves's poems quite often have the curious distinction of conveying an impersonal tone that is nonetheless distinctly affable. They appeal to us in much the same way that a particularly bright person with whom we have apparently nothing much in common will excite our interest and imagination by speaking to us in an animated and unguarded manner. This quality is most readily discernable in Graves's lighter pieces like "Wm. Brazier" ("At the end of TARRIER'S Lane, which was the street/ We children thought the pleasantest in town" CP 70) and "Song: Lift Boy" ("Let me tell you a story of how I began:/ I began as a boot-boy and ended as the boot-man" CP 54); but it is also noticeable in more serious or satirical pieces like "Warning To Children," "Sea Side," "The Thieves," "Any Honest Housewife," "A Former Attachment," "Gardener," "The Shot," and "Time." The effort required to sustain this tone is better appreciated if we realize the very deliberate concentration that Graves gives to this matter. The following passage from his 1922 collection of "notebook reflections" On English Poetry reveals his concern for the poet's need to moderate his tone of self-importance:

The danger of the very necessary  
arrogance [required for sustained poetic

concentration] is that it is likely so to intrude the poet's personal eccentricities into what he writes that the reader recognizes them and does not read the "I" as being the voice of universality.<sup>34</sup>

Graves's earliest attempts at achieving the "voice of universality" can be seen in the poems written under the strong influence of English folk ballads and nursery rhymes. Very few of his early ballads are included in his volumes of collected poems which succeeded the first collection, Poems 1914-26. Those which have survived the successive excisions made by Graves as he prepared each new volume of his collected poems, such as "Allie," "A Frosty Night," and "Henry and Mary," are notable for their suitably quaint and confidently delicate tone. There is an unapologetic fancifulness in lines like "He gave her a snowdrop/ On a stalk of green" (CP 13) and "Allie, call the birds in,/ The birds from the sky,/ Allie calls, Allie sings,/ Down they all fly" (CP 11) which one associates with the tone of an anonymous poem which has been passed along from generation to generation. The deliberately frivolous tone of a nursery rhyme will obviously not be suited to a serious theme, yet in poems like "Warning To Children," "Lollocks," and "The Thieves" Graves manages to secure the "voice of impersonality" and keep any obvious idiosyncracies at bay by incorporating some of the playful tactics of these verses

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<sup>34</sup>Robert Graves, On English Poetry (New York: Knopf, 1922) 136.

learned in childhood.

Graves's alertness to the flexibility of tone which sensitivity to childlike viewpoints may afford a writer is evident in his comment regarding Lewis Carroll's Alice books. Graves admires Carroll's

whimsicality, the Englishman's approval of Socrates's suggestion that the height of happiness is to be young with one's friends. It is a light, playful nonsense falling decently short of imaginative voluptuousness, but not either so glittering as the wit of Shakespeare's comedies nor so serious as the so-called 'comic relief' of his tragedies.<sup>35</sup>

Once again we see that what the writer doesn't do--in this case he does not engage in "imaginative voluptuousness"--is especially important in creating the desired effect. One of the most interesting examples of Graves's poems which retains a securely impersonal tone without sacrificing its whimsicality is the delightful "Lollocks." For all of its playfulness, however, "Lollocks" displays a serious psychological insightfulness:

By sloth on sorrow fathered,  
These dusty-featured Lollocks  
Have their nativity in all disordered  
Backs of cupboard drawers.

They play hide and seek  
Among collars and novels  
And empty medicine bottles,  
And letters from abroad  
That never will be answered.

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<sup>35</sup>Robert Graves, Impenetrability, or The Proper Habit of English (London: Hogarth, 1920) 51.

Every sultry night  
 They plague little children,  
 Gurgling from the cistern,  
 Humming from the air,  
 Skewing up the bed-clothes,  
 Twitching the blind.

When the imbecile aged  
 Are over-long in dying  
 And the nurse drowzes,  
 Lollocks come skipping  
 Up the tattered stairs  
 And are nasty together  
 In the bed's shadow.

The signs of their presence  
 Are boils on the neck,  
 Dreams of vexation suddenly recalled  
 In the middle of the morning,  
 Languor after food.

Men cannot see them,  
 Men cannot hear them,  
 Do not believe in them--  
 But suffer the more  
 Both in neck and belly.

Women can see them--  
 O those naughty wives  
 Who sit by the fireside  
 Munching bread and honey,  
 Watching them in mischief  
 From corners of their eyes,  
 Slily allowing them to lick  
 Honey-sticky fingers.

Sovereign against Lollocks  
 Are hard broom and soft broom,  
 To well comb the hair,  
 To well brush the shoe,  
 And to pay every debt  
 As it falls due. (CP 125)

The opening two lines prepare us for the dim torpidity created by these demons of acedia, but their formidable parentage is immediately cut down to size by Graves's cleverly-inserted detail which tells us that the lollocks inhabit "disordered /Backs of cupboard drawers." The

sinister and elusive nature of the lollocks is sustained by Graves's restraint in describing their appearance beyond his initial reference to them as being "dusty-featured." This is a particularly appropriate detail since it suggests the dust which accumulates upon neglected things while also hinting at the difficulty of ever getting a clear view of the creatures.<sup>36</sup> The mischievous antics of the Lollocks-- "Gurgling from the cistern"; and being "nasty together/ In the bed's shadow"--are amusingly apt representations of the minds of those who are both listless and curiously agitated. The Lollocks' lively meddlesomeness does not contradict their slovenly and dejected parentage; rather, it highlights the very real, if only flutteringly and apparently insubstantial nervous perturbations of the mind which is remotely cognizant of unfinished endeavors, no matter how small they may be.

The whimsicality of "Lollocks" is kept from drifting away into meaningless fantasy by Graves's attention to realistic and drab details as well as by his practical

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Walter De La Mare is probably Graves's closest competitor for the title of champion twentieth-century adult nursery-rhymer. His "Idleness" is a close runner-up to "Lollocks":

I saw old Idleness, fat, with great cheeks,  
Puffed to the huge circumference of a sigh.

His eyes were sad as fishes that swim up  
And stare upon an element not theirs.

Collected Poems (New York: Holt, 1941) 23.

advice at the end of the poem.<sup>37</sup> The slight physical and psychological disturbances which emerge in the company of Lollocks are concisely listed in the fifth stanza, and these "signs" are chosen from suitably common experience, although they are not what might be considered commonplace poetic images. Graves provides a succinct list of small ailments which a poet who is predominantly concerned with grander scales of anguish--such as Robert Lowell or G. M. Hopkins--is not as likely to acknowledge. In doing so, Graves is able to develop an impersonality that appeals to the reader who more often measures out his life in mornings, afternoons and weekends than in either the pitiful manner of Prufrock's

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Graves's penchant for the topsy-turvy personifications of nursery rhymes can be seen to have more serious philosophical ramifications if we view it in light of the following observation by the ancient language scholars, Henri and H. A. Frankfort: "The world appears to primitive man neither inanimate nor empty but redundant with life. And life has individuality, in man and beast and plant, and in every phenomenon which confronts man--the thunderclap, the sudden shadow, the eerie and unknown clearing in the wood, the stone which suddenly hurts him when he stumbles while on a hunting trip. Any phenomenon may at any time face him, not as an 'It,' but as 'Thou.' 'Thou' is not contemplated with intellectual detachment; it is experienced as life confronting life, involving every faculty of man in a reciprocal relationship." Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1946) 14. Readers who speak slightingly of Graves's "detachment"--as well as of his arcane bookishness--would do well to consider the ways in which his vivid and responsive imagination also delves into the emotionally and intellectually demanding world of potent myths and folklore.



"coffeespoons,"<sup>38</sup> or Wordsworth's epiphanic "spots of time,/ That with distinct pre-eminence retain/ A renovating virtue."<sup>39</sup> The impact of the lines "Dreams of vexation suddenly recalled/ In the middle of the morning" is achieved by the remarkably clear expression of an easily overlooked yet subtly disconcerting experience. "Vexation" is a particularly fitting term since it implies the fretful and distressing feelings caused by such recollections without adding any suggestions of defeated purpose that might be inferred from a word such as "frustration." (In fact, Graves uses this term in several other poems to indicate similar moments of fixed agitation: "As the vexed insomniac dream-forges" CP 126; "Too fast caught by care of humankind,/ Easily vexed and grieved" CP 305; "The sisters puzzled and vexed, the brothers vexed and bitter" CP 65.) As in "Lost Acres," Graves wishes to bear witness to elusive mental states without indulging in any lengthy and overly-descriptive "imaginative voluptuousness" which might alienate or confuse the reader.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot 1909-63 (London: Faber, 1963) 14.

<sup>39</sup>William Wordsworth, The Prelude, in Selected Poems and Prose of William Wordsworth ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton, 1965) 345.

<sup>40</sup>For a clear exposition of Graves's anti-Modernist attitudes towards this issue, see his essay "These Be Your Gods, O Israel!" in The Crowning Privilege (London: Cassell, 1955) 112-135.

The quiet fastidiousness of several of Graves's poems contributes to their charming tone. It is not the type of elaborate fastidiousness which inspires a poet to include as many effects as possible, such as we see in Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill," but rather a scrupulousness which encourages a poet to be sure that what is presented is "just so." In this respect, Graves shares something with plain stylists like Ben Jonson, J. V. Cunningham, and Yvor Winters as they all may be viewed as implicitly or explicitly following Cicero's guideline:

Just as some women are said to be handsomer when unadorned --the very lack of ornament becomes them--so this plain style gives pleasure even when unembellished: there is something in both cases which lends greater charm, but without showing itself.<sup>41</sup>

One of Graves's triumphs of charming unadornment is "Despite and Still":

Have you not read  
The words in my head,  
And I made part  
Of your own heart?  
We have been such as draw  
The losing straw--  
You of your gentleness,  
I of my rashness,  
Both of despair--  
Yet still might share  
This happy will:  
To love despite and still.  
Never let us deny  
The thing's necessity,  
But, O, refuse  
To choose  
Where chance may seem to give

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<sup>41</sup>Cicero quoted in Trimpi, 7.

Loves in alternative. (CP 127)

There are no ingenious metaphors to ponder (unlike, say, Coleridge's poem to his fiancée, "The Eolian Harp" in which the woman seems to take a back seat to his rhetoric), no classical allusions to widen the significance of the lover's predicament, and no vivid sensual imagery or provocative symbolism. The image of drawing the losing straw is so conventional that one is not at all likely to visualize it, and there is no indication that Graves is using the phrase ironically. Yet the poem has a freshness even though it employs no flamboyant rhetorical figures. This is perhaps somewhat misleading, since the very brevity of the lines and the close-set rhymes do give the poem a notably (and Skeltonic) swift tempo. This brisk pace, however, is more likely to trivialize subject matter than to invigorate it. Yet the lively tempo of the poem does add to the plainness of the words a sense of urgency that is both surprising and effective. The curtness of the initial question is neither trite nor insolent once we see that the speaker is trying to convince his beloved of both his need and conviction ("The thing's necessity"). The lack of embellishment enforces the idea of necessity as well as avoids any idly romantic associations which might linger around one's entertaining the possibility of a "chance" alternative love. Even the rashness of the speaker is conveyed without blatantly showing itself in any list of reckless behaviour; instead,

the quick succession of lines is seen to be expressive of the speaker's temerity.

To conclude that "Despite and Still" is a charming poem seems to belittle its admirable clarity and sincerity. Such a conclusion would also amount to a rather trivial and superficial manner of judging a poem's worth according to its charmingness. Indeed, a certain amount of any thing's charm relies upon its unfamiliarity, or our limited knowledge of it, hence our conventional complaint that after a time something has "lost its charm." Something may be alluring, and perhaps even nothing more than fleetingly so, when we do not immediately understand why it pleases us, or if it pleases us beyond our expectations. Graves's poems are often charming not simply in the mundane sense that they offer quaint variations upon conventional themes, but because they capture something of the bewildering nature of even our most common experiences. (The poems of Robert Herrick, the paintings of Paul Klee, and the songs of Lennon and McCartney may come to mind in this respect.) Graves's poetic skill could be likened to that of an honest magician who charms his audience with his imperturbable poise while insisting that there is nothing supernatural, at least to his knowledge, about what he can do.

There is a common-sense resiliency to Graves's particular brand of charm which ought to be distinguished from Swinburne's dressy charmingness ("the weeping winter, /

All whose flowers are tears, and round his temples/ Iron blossom of frost is bound for ever;" "the sea mark/ Flame as fierce as the fervid eyes of lions/ Half divided the eyelids of the sunset")<sup>42</sup>, or, more significantly, Walter De La Mare's tissue-thin sonorous charm. Even when Graves is at his most "atmospheric" as in the Browningsque, "The Pier-Glass," he emerges from the murky melancholy of the woman's "time-sunk memory" with a plea for "True life, natural breath; not this phantasma" (CP 20). Graves's charm is grounded in his saving wit and sobriety; it is unlike the charm of the filmy tenuous reverie seen in, for example, the third stanza of De La Mare's "Sea Magic":

Ever the rustle of the advancing foam,  
 The surges' desolate thunder, and the cry  
 As of some lone babe in the whispering sky;  
 Ever I peer into the restless gloom  
 To where a ship clad dim and loftily  
 Looms steadfast in the wonder of her home.<sup>43</sup>

The almost magical quality of some of Graves's poems such as "Sick Love," "The Cool Web," and "Pure Death" has been remarked upon by William H. Pritchard: "The wonderful moments in Graves's poems occur when something suddenly bursts forth in front of us; and although we look back, reread the poem and see how everything led up to this

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<sup>42</sup>Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Hendecasyllabics" in The Symbolist Poem, ed. Edward Engelberg (New York: Dutton, 1967) 89-90.

<sup>43</sup>Walter De La Mare, "Sea Magic," The Complete Poems of Walter De La Mare (London: Faber, 1969) 77.

moment, it still seems a miracle."<sup>44</sup> Since Pritchard offers little analysis in his brief section on Graves in his book, this may appear to be a rather excessive, if not unprovable claim regarding Graves's poems, but in the context of Pritchard's commentary in which he is responding to those critics who refer to Graves's narrowness, one can appreciate his desire to point to a quality in Graves's best poems which is readily overlooked by his detractors. My belief is that Graves's exacting attention to detail in his revisions gives some of his work its "magical" unity.

The awareness that all of our attempts at using language to understand our existence fall short of expressing the conscious immediacy of even our most fundamental experiences is one which compels Graves to make sure that the words which he does use are as painstakingly precise as they can be. When one discovers the rigorous revisions that almost all of Graves's poems undergo--which becomes abundantly clear if one examines the drawers filled with his poetry manuscripts at the Lockwood Memorial Poetry Archives at SUNY in Buffalo--one can see that the opening stanza of "Devilishly Disturbed" is not as flippant as its jaunty rhythm might first lead us to believe:

Devilishly disturbed,  
 By this unready pen:  
 For every word I write  
 I scratch out nine or ten.

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<sup>44</sup>William H. Pritchard, Seeing Through Everything (New York: Oxford UP, 1977) 122.

And each surviving word  
 Resentfully I make  
 Sweat for those nine or ten  
 I cancelled for its sake. (Poems 1930-33, 21)

The "sweat" which goes into Graves's poems is not always readily apparent, and this may be due largely to the emotional restraint and apparently detached tone of several of his more striking poems. To view this detachment as an indication of leisurely aloofness or emotional vacuity is wrong despite any suspicions one might have that a poet cannot be charmingly witty and at the same time fully engaged with his subject matter. Graves's revisions to his published poems are seldom attenuations of their impact; most often we can discern a sharpening of ideas. One discovers an unrelenting sense of there being "recognizably a something" which the poet wants to bring into the medium of language while remaining as receptive as possible to the experience that he is trying to understand. The meticulous negotiation between a poet's style and his experience is perhaps nowhere more fittingly exemplified in Graves's work than in "The Cool Web." If one examines the three different published versions of this poem, noticing the small changes made in the two later versions, what strikes one is Graves's unflagging efforts to make each word earn its keep. Here is the last version that Graves published:

Children are dumb to say how hot the day is,  
 How hot the scent is of the summer rose,  
 How dreadful the black wastes of evening sky,  
 How dreadful the tall soldiers drumming by.

But we have speech, to chill the angry day,  
 And speech, to dull the rose's cruel scent.  
 We spell away the overhanging night,  
 We spell away the soldiers and the fright.

There's a cool web of language winds us in,  
 Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:  
 We grow sea-green at last and coldly die  
 In brininess and volubility.

But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,  
 Throwing off language and its watery clasp  
 Before our death, instead of when death comes,  
 Facing the wide glare of the children's day,  
 Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,  
 We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.<sup>45</sup>

The first stanza remains unchanged from the poem's first appearance in Poems 1914-26 to its final form as published in Collected Poems 1961. The first two lines in stanza two, however, did not meet with Graves's continued approval. Here are the different published versions:

But we have speech, that cools the hottest sun,  
 And speech, that dulls the hottest rose's scent.  
 (Poems 1914-26, 215)

But we have speech, that blunts the angry heat,  
 And speech, that dulls the rose's cruel scent.  
 (CP 1938, 53)

The idea that using language to register and to understand the impact of our experience is in some ways always a diminishment of the intensity of the experience itself is evident in each version, but the revisions show that Graves was unsatisfied with the simplistic nature of the parallel between "hottest sun" and the "hottest rose's scent." In the second version, we have the more distinctive phrases

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<sup>45</sup>Robert Graves, "The Cool Web" Collected Poems 1961 (New York: Doubleday, 1961) 68.



"blunts the angry heat" and "dulls the rose's cruel scent," which give a sense of the emotional properties which a child may instinctively attribute to the brilliant sensuous phenomena of his surroundings. The children's fearfulness in the face of the powerful and mysterious presence of nature is dazzlingly captured in the notion of the cruelty of a rose's scent. Yet the possible reasons for the substitution of "that blunts the angry heat" for "to chill the angry day" are not as easy to explain. One possibility is that Graves was not sure of the concrete validity of "blunting" heat and also decided that "chill" would be closer in meaning to the earlier "ccols." The substitution of "heat" with "day" may have been made to keep a tighter parallel with the opening line of the poem ("Children are dumb to say how hot the day is"). The overall superiority of these lines in the poem is noticeable by the way in which they can be seen to chime better with the other parts of the poem. "Chill" is more appropriate than the "cools" of the 1926 version because it more forcefully emphasizes the negative aspects of speech than the "cool web" of the third stanza which by the end of the poem has a more ambiguous value. Also, by changing the verbs to their infinitive forms, Graves conveys a greater sense of the deliberateness of using language as a type of protective force ("And speech, that dulls the rose's scent" might imply more of an inadvertance in our use than is perhaps always probable).

The treacherous nature of the predicament that Graves is examining in "The Cool Web" is vividly emphasized in his changes to the final stanza. The Poems 1914-26 version reads

But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,  
 Throwing off language and its wateriness  
 Before our death, instead of when death comes,  
 Facing the brightness of the children's day,  
 Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,  
 We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.

"Wateriness" is replaced by "watery clasp," and "brightness" by "wide glare" in the Collected Poems 1938 version.

"Wateriness" has implications of dilution and the idea of experience being watered down by a mediating language, but it is not as vigorous and menacing as "watery clasp." Also, something of the drowning-man-like struggle that would be required to escape the grip of language is conveyed in the image of being clasped. The replacement of "brightness" with "wide glare" does not so much alter the sense of the partially blinding exposure of a child's perspective (although "wide glare" definitely emphasizes the obliquity of such a view) as it manages to keep one from making any associations of cheerfulness or perspicuity that could be inferred from "brightness." This change is especially significant because it reinforces the restrained fearfulness of the final line of the poem. The children may feel more intensely, but to face the "wide glare" and "black wastes" of the sky could inspire further feelings of extreme vulnerability and insignificance that perhaps would not be

possible (or wise) to carry into adulthood.

As small as these revisions may be, they do give the poem more than what might be considered only a veneer of eloquence; at times they reveal the subtleties of even the most commonplace and apparently vague words and phrases.<sup>46</sup> For instance, in the first two published versions of "The Cool Web," the second line in the third stanza reads "Retreat from too much gladness, too much fear"; but Graves changes the line in the 1961 version to "Retreat from too much joy, or too much fear." Initially, this appears to be nothing more than the fussy tinkering of an overly scrupulous mind, but if one considers the context of the alteration, it is difficult to deny that "joy" is the more fitting term. The word "Joy" provides a sharper antithesis to "fear" while also more clearly evoking a sense of uninhibited and spontaneous emotion than the somewhat more adult and mildly reflective "gladness." The two words are not as easily interchangeable as we might assume; for example, one could speak of "pure, unmitigated joy" without any tinge of irony, whereas the mention of "pure, unmitigated gladness" might elicit a wry smile. It is Graves's meticulous attention to even the supposedly simple

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<sup>46</sup>Even the unrevised phrase, "How dreadful," of lines three and four has especial resonance: one can hear perhaps both the intonation of prissy high-society persons as they might use it to refer to a rained-out garden party, as well as the poet's observant sympathy. In the second sense of this phrase, Graves seems determined to put the dread back into dreadful.

words in his poems that adds to their deceptively plain surfaces.

The emotional reserve of "The Cool Web" has led two critics to decide that the poem has a stronger emotional bias than is readily apparent. In my opinion, the first person plural used in the poem appears to be a truly impersonal "we," not merely a presumptuous ploy of one who attempts to gain credibility for the specious universality of his statements. "We," as adults, in fact do "have speech" to spell things away, and we do not need to see ourselves as poets in order to recognize that this power of speech is all too easily used as a way to distance ourselves from the disturbing immediacy of our individual experiences. The poem is not at all a neurotic self-questioning of linguistic entrapment or even an occasion for despondency: it is a mature recognition of the necessity of language despite its at times terrifyingly standardizing control of our innermost feelings. However, the thoroughness of Graves's emotional restraint has provoked two critics to view the poem from two different emotional standpoints. Douglas Day, in his 1963 study of Graves's poetry and criticism, sees the poem as an example of Graves's "negativism"<sup>47</sup>, while Jean-Paul Forester's position in his

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<sup>47</sup>Douglas Day, Swifter Than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1963) 95. The sense of completely hopeless entrapment which Day reads into "The Cool Web" is summarized in his loose paraphrase of the poem: "We must choose then, between a life

1979 article "The Gravesian Poem or Language Ill-treated" is that Graves "believes that we must 'let our tongues lose self-possession'" and that Graves "does not hesitate [to embrace the madness inherent in letting 'our tongues lose self-possession'] and welcomes such encounters as beneficial."<sup>48</sup> Forester does at least concede that the alternative offered in the final stanza is "no easy task" and "that Graves fears that it may confront us with unsettling discoveries."<sup>49</sup> Yet there is no indication that Forester acknowledges the "But" which introduces the final stanza. If Graves believes that "we must 'let our tongues lose self-possession,'" why would he begin the stanza with "But"? This conjunction ought to convey clearly the negative consequence that is portrayed in the final section of the poem, and, if nothing else, should at least show that Graves does not "welcome such encounters without hesitation."

On the other hand, to concur with Day that the poem is

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of half-tones and a life of madness; our reason cannot cope with the force of existence unless that force is dissipated through a web of abstract, opaque verbiage. There is no suggestion here, as there was in "Alice," that it is possible--especially for the true poet--to survive in a world of unreason." 96. I would answer Day's claim by suggesting that the poem itself is Graves's testament to the powers of the sensually self-aware use of language in good poetry which always reminds us of newness and possibility in our world.

<sup>48</sup>Jean-Paul Forester, "The Gravesian Poem or Language Ill-treated," English Studies 60 (1979): 474.

<sup>49</sup>Forester, 475.

an example of Graves's "negativism" would be a much too perfunctory dismissal of Graves's achievement. "The Cool Web" may not be a celebration of the life-affirming potency of language, but the poem as a whole does show the control which is attainable if one is determined enough to use language with a cautious dexterity and to sustain an awareness of its distancing properties. It is an attempt to place language within our experience and to accept it as essential to our survival. By refraining from either a wholesale exaltation or debasement of language we can at least attempt to gain some understanding of our experience without having to engage in a type of linguistic domination over it or succumb to a primal submission to it. Graves vividly portrays the potential one has for resorting to either of these extremes, and implies that all of our attempts at coping with the intensity of some moments in our lives are bound to deviate in some measure towards one extreme or the other. The care that Graves takes in selecting even the simplest words and phrases in his poems shows that he is continually struggling against the perils of volubility; his wit and emotional reserve keep him from condoning a wildly intemperate receptivity to experience for its own sake.

Graves demonstrates that language can be used constructively to contain and clarify our experiences, even those experiences which are potentially elusive. What makes

so many of his poems so subtly unusual, however, is that he has the ability to preserve a sense of there being "recognizably a something" to which he is trying to bear witness, without allowing the individual words in the poem to draw too much attention to themselves. It may be paradoxical to suggest that the extremely self-conscious use of language by a poet is designed to keep the reader from scrutinizing it, but it does seem that through using words in as explicit a manner as possible--which is not necessarily the simplest, although it may give the impression of simplicity--Graves manages to heighten the enigmatic nature of the experience itself. For example, in "To Be In Love" Graves attempts to display what such riveting emotion feels like, and in doing so, he shows both the triumph and limitation of such an endeavour:

To spring impetuously in air and remain  
 Treading on air for three heart-beats or four  
 Then to descend at leisure; or else to scale  
 The forward-tilted crag with no hand-holds;  
 Or, disembodied, to carry roses home  
 From a Queen's garden--this is being in love.  
 Graced with agilitas and subtilitas  
 At which few famous lovers ever guessed  
 Though children may foreknow it, deep in dream,  
 And ghosts may mourn it, haunting their own tombs,  
 And peacocks cry it, in default of speech. (CP 376)

When one tries to describe the more intense moments of experience, one is likely to depend upon some kind of exaggeration; the function of such a practice is insightfully characterized by Rosemond Tuve's comments regarding the Renaissance rhetorician John Hoskins:

For in Hoskins' words, flat impossibilities are used that rather we may conceive the 'unspeakableness' than the untruth; we are to be aware that hyperbole is a desire to point at a significancy beyond speech.<sup>50</sup>

This appears to be the purpose of the hyperboles in "To Be In Love;" yet the curiousness of Graves's use of them in this poem is that he can employ a stock hyperbole such as "Treading on air" and revitalize it with his nimble inclusion of details such as "three heart-beats or four" and "Then to descend at leisure." Graves enlivens the same cliché of the light-hearted lover in "Not to Sleep" by using a similar, yet even more inventive and witty extension of the image: "I shall glide downstairs, my feet brushing the carpet/ In courtesy to civilized progression" (CP 279). The paradoxical nature of this technique which uses hyperbole to intimate the "unspeakableness" of an aspect of reality is that it indicates how language can approach experiences which we believe to be beyond speech, yet such a technique simultaneously concedes that we cannot define them as accurately as we may desire. This paradox is given an especially appropriate manifestation in the final image of "To Be In Love" where the "peacocks cry it, in default of speech." Humans haven't the capacity to express their love in anything as shatteringly shrill and urgent as the peacock's cry, but Graves nonetheless implies that this

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<sup>50</sup>Tuве, 150.



awareness of the inadequacy of expression may also haunt creatures that exist without the refinements of language.

The dangers inherent in Graves's pursuit of ways of knowing which lie beyond the borders of linguistic knowing will be discussed in more detail in chapters four and five, but it is worth noting here that the failure and flatness of a great deal of his poetry written after 1950 seems to be the result of his belief in an esoteric conception of love. As a consequence, the impersonal tone of the poems preceding his later period too often deteriorates into brashness and sanctimoniousness.

The success of Graves's best poems depends on a certain watchful fidelity to the relationship between the orderliness of the intellect, and the inexhaustible--even if only minute--variousness of daily human experience. The heartening faith in what Graves calls "the decent mystery of [his] progress" (CP 198) is characterized by his description of the butterfly in "Flying Crooked" that "lurches here and here by guess/ And God and hope and hopelessness" (CP 65), whereas the more sceptical and shrewd side of his "progress" is discernible in "The Devil's Advice To Storytellers" which concludes that "Nice contradiction between fact and fact/ Will make the whole read human and exact" (CP 69). It is rare to find a poet at once so eager to acknowledge the rejuvenating mysteriousness of existence and at the same time so adamantly determined not to mystify it.

Chapter Three  
Part I

"I Know with Labour and Most Amply":  
Knowledge and Intuition  
in Graves's Poetry

Everything which is known is comprehended not according to its own force but rather according to the faculty of those who comprehend it.

Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy

A strange diffidence sometimes overcomes the explicator of Graves's poems when he is asked to characterize the poetry in general or to locate Graves's favorite themes. This may be because of the variegated and uneven nature of his canon, but perhaps something of this hesitation results from the imagined presence of a Gravesian version of Isherwood's "Watcher in Spanish" from Lions and Shadows who looms in corners wagging a finger at anyone who makes any overtly disingenuous or affectedly intelligent-sounding remarks. Or, maybe Graves's own acerbic and deflationary phrase echoes in the mind: "the thundering text, the snivelling commentary" (CP 83). Ultimately, the difficulty of summing up Graves's poetry in any pat formulation provides a refreshing starting-point from which to begin a clear investigation of his work: we may begin by asking, "Why, then, are these brief poems so difficult to characterize?"

The temptation to offer biographical information as a solution to the issue of Graves's multifarious canon is a great, and not altogether unhelpful one, but it does occasionally detract from the radiant and enduring effect of Graves's best poems by implying that they are--if one considers such-and-such predispositions of Graves--the-Majorcan-self-exile and ex-war veteran--fairly explicable by-products of such a person's creative imagination. Although this is an exaggeration of the shortcomings of biographical criticism, it is not, I believe, a completely

unfair one.<sup>1</sup> What the essentially biographical studies of Graves's poetry underemphasize is the dauntingly individuated nature of his best poems. One would not say of Graves, as one is tempted to observe of, for instance, Wallace Stevens, that he was too often writing what appeared to be the same poem (albeit an ambitious one), nor is one led to contend that, like Auden, he could turn just about anything into poetry.

It would seem misguided to assert that the poet who writes that "There is one story and one story only" (CP 137)--namely, the chronicle of the White Goddess--was not also in some way continually writing the same poem, were it

<sup>1</sup>In the second volume of Richard Perceval Graves's biography of Graves, for example, we find the following description of the events preceding his writing of the fine poem, "Leda" ("Heart with what lonely fears you ached" CP 75): "It was discovered that [Graves's] latest 'boil' was actually a fistula connected with the colon, for which a minor operation was necessary. For a while Robert became extremely gloomy; and entering the hospital he reverted briefly to complete emotional dependence on Riding, penning the first lines of a self-condemnatory poem about lust and guilt." Robert Graves: The Years With Laura 1926-40 (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1990) 272. Similarly, in Douglas Day's book on Graves we see Day arguing that the paucity of exceptional poems written by Graves in the late 'Twenties is due to the fact that Graves "was far too sanguinary and intense to deal objectively in his poetry with the psychological and metaphysical concerns which now intrigued him so." Swifter Than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1963) 98. While neither of these excerpts is patently absurd, the latter is too general and unsubstantiated, and the former so specific that there is the temptation to ask if fistulas make for more intense--and better crafted--poetry.

not demonstrable that there is more than one story in his pre-Goddess poetry of the twenties and thirties. I suspect that the search for the Goddess in the interstices of Graves's pre-1938 poetry is motivated primarily by many critics' understandable hope of discovering origins and tendencies in his early achievements. However, the search for a thematic continuum in a poet's career can lead to a certain amount of distortion. My contention is that these earlier poems are firmly established successes on their own individual merits, and that viewing them as fragmentary intimations of the more serene and mature vision of the Goddess is dangerous no matter how qualified one's proleptic evaluations may be. I hope to add to the varied and valuable perceptions presented in Martin Seymour-Smith's, Michael Kirkham's, and D. N. G. Carter's studies containing sensitively-argued biographical exegeses of Graves's poetry, and to explore some of the hitherto unexamined interrelationships among the poems, and see what may be discovered by resisting the faint seismic rumblings of the Goddess in the earlier poems.

Graves is quite capable of defending himself against anyone attempting to formulate a pattern within his work (other than that which he envisions himself): he suggests that such persons would attempt to mar "the decent mystery of his progress" ("Leaving the Rest Unsaid" CP 198). Given Graves's beginnings as a predominantly whimsical Georgian

poet, there is no question that by the thirties he had stylistically and thematically progressed a great deal.<sup>2</sup>

Given Graves's wry estimation of the relative value of certain kinds of poetic theorizing, one must be especially cautious when searching for latent thematic patterns in his pre-Goddess poetry. However, I believe that there are several patterns which are related, but which it would be misleading and over-simplifying to conflate into any single pattern more restrictive than Graves's almost systematic refusal to comply with standard intellectual preconceptions of knowledge. Thus, I hope to show that his indefatigable interest in the recurring patterns and manifold interrelationships of the body, will, emotions, and intellect as they operate in the reception and consolidation of knowledge, is one which helps us to see his poems as the dynamic creations that they are.

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Graves is more interested in the various kinds of

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<sup>2</sup>The Georgian legacy is not an entirely negative one, of course. Alongside the "elaphantitis of the soul," "poultry love," and weekend nature worship curtly acknowledged as essential Georgian flaws by Roy Campbell in his essay, "Contemporary Poetry," [in Scrutinies by Various Writers, ed. Edgell Rickword (London: Wishart and Company, 1928) 172] is the positive achievement of the Georgian poets in rejecting the laboriousness and muddiness of late-Victorian poetry, their fashioning of a more arresting syntax, and their streamlining of diction.

active knowing--as opposed to stable, and hence often merely accumulated inert "knowledge"--than almost any other poet of his time. With the obvious exception of the two dozen or so Goddess poems and those love poems in praise of Her mythical supernumeraries and mortal representatives, he relentlessly strives to begin afresh with each new poem and is remarkably successful in keeping his prodigious amount of linguistic, mythological, and historical learning from cluttering the texture of the verse. The focus, in poems such as "Warning to Children," "Pure Death," "Sick Love," and "It Was All Very Tidy," is upon the poetic texture and delivery, and not how it can be used as a platform for disseminating religious, aesthetic, or political knowledge. One essential difference between Graves and his contemporaries, however, lies in Graves's astounding refinement of many of his poems so that they become quite unlike one another; the forms of his best poems really do seem to shape themselves to the demands of their special kinds of knowing.

Since Graves most often writes in traditional stanzas and meters, it might be objected that his poetic forms could not be radically different from those of his non-free-verse-writing contemporaries in any meaningful sense of the term. However, given the memorable resonance of a poem like "Sick Love," one quickly realizes that, after acknowledging the echoes of Herrick's "Gather Ye Rosebuds" and the "Song of Solomon" in the opening line--"O Love be fed with apples



while you may"--one is faced with a poem which is markedly singular in both content and form. "Sick Love" demonstrates all too clearly the perplexing challenge which presents itself to the reader determined to study the quicksilver-like texture of these fundamentally complex terms, especially when they are applied to the medium of poetry, where words are ineluctably bound to mean as well as to be, despite what Archibald MacLeish proposes to the contrary in his "Ars Poetica." Something of the "decent mystery" of the form of Graves's poems may be approached in the light of the following remarks by the French philosopher and scientist, Gaston Bachelard, about Paul Valéry:

Valéry becomes aware of the fact that a shell carved by a man would be obtained from the outside, through a series of innumerable acts that would bear the mark of a touched-up beauty; whereas the "mollusk exudes its shell," it lets the building material "seep through, "distill its marvellous covering as needed....In this way Valéry returns to the mystery of form-giving life, the mystery of slow, continuous formation.<sup>3</sup>

The profusion of drafts which--written over periods of years, and even decades--nearly every memorable Graves poem underwent, attests to the process of "slow continuous formation" in his work. Some of Graves's best poems do have a lovely organism-like unity. The ideas of proportion and growth, along with the popular notion of the existence of an animating force, are especially relevant to his poetics, as

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<sup>3</sup>Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) 106.

can be seen in the following passage about John Clare from Graves's essay, "The Road to Rydal Mount":

[Clare] had somehow acquired the rare faculty of knowing how and when to end a poem. His obsession with Nature made him think of a poem as living thing, rather than a slice cut from the cake of literature, and his poems are still alive.<sup>4</sup>

A related concern emerges in Graves's "Synthetic Such":

'The sum of all the parts of Such--  
Of each laboratory scene--  
Is Such.' While science means this much  
And means no more, why, let it mean!

But were the science-men to find  
Some animating principle  
Which gave synthetic Such a mind  
Vital, though metaphysical--

To Such, such an event, I think,  
Would cause unscientific pain:  
Science, appalled by thought, would shrink  
To its component parts again. (CP 75)

Graves continually delights in the subtly unpredictable, yet perfectly organized wholeness of organic life.<sup>5</sup> What makes him so different from other poets of his time who are fascinated with organic unity and mysteriousness, such as D. H. Lawrence and Edward Thomas, is that Graves writes very little poetry which is "about"

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Graves, "The Road to Rydal Mount," in The Crowning Privilege (London: Cassell, 1955) 51.

<sup>5</sup>Another example of Graves's use of organic metaphors in discussing poetry can be seen in his essay, "The Word Baraka" in Oxford Addresses on Poetry (London: Cassell, 1961) 104: "A poem seems to choose its own colouring, voice, form, gait, character, in the blind moment of inception, just as the human embryo does; these are not predeterminable elements, except perhaps in a test-tube homunculus."

nature, at least overtly, and his most notorious poem that broaches the subject is the bathetically debunking "Nature's Lineaments" which suggests: "That all she [Nature] has of mind/ Is wind/ Retching among the empty spaces,/ Ruffling the idiot grasses" (CP 79). The obvious landscape-lover baiting that seems to be the basis of this poem is representative of Graves's mistrust of a certain type of self-aggrandizing nature-worship. However, even a casual glance at the chest-thumping self-projection of the speaker into the brawny landscape described in "Rocky Acres," and the awareness of the life-awakening vigor of nature in "Language of the Seasons"--"where we report how weight of snow,/ Or weight of fruit, tears branches from the tree" (CP 130)--reveals that Graves's relationship with nature is a rich blend of admiration, recoil, and manipulation.

Graves's consummate control in certain poems is in some measure the result of a blanket dismissal of complexities which he views as irresolvable. But, as is often the case, Graves tries to transform a potential limitation into a merit by suggesting that such complexities are best left to those poets whom he derogatively labels "Apollonian" (such as Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas). This label implies that they are uninspired, "philosophical" (a dirty word in Graves's lexicon), intellectually top-heavy versifiers.<sup>6</sup>

That Graves cannot be categorized as proceeding either

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<sup>6</sup>See Oxford Addresses on Poetry, 43.

as a poetic phenomenologist, concerned with maintaining that verifiable phenomena are the only realities, or as a noumenologist, interested solely in discovering the essence of the thing in itself, is evident when one examines poems such as "Warning to Children" and "In Broken Images." In both of these poems, Graves asks how we know rather than what we know. The dizzying perplexities of the transitive verb "know" are presented in their simultaneously alluring and ominous forms by his strategy of drawing our attention to the ways in which we think we know. Consider, for example, the kinaesthetic vigor with which "Warning to Children" (which I will quote in full) displays a paradox much like the one delineated by Wittgenstein in his

Philosophical Investigations:

"The general form of propositions is: This is how things are."--That is the kind of proposition that one repeats oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of a thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.<sup>7</sup>

Children, if you dare to think  
 Of the greatness, rareness, muchness,  
 Fewness of this precious only  
 Endless world in which you say  
 You live, you think of things like this:  
 Blocks of slate enclosing dappled  
 Red and green, enclosing tawny  
 Yellow nets, enclosing white  
 And black acres of dominoes,  
 Where a neat brown paper parcel  
 Tempts you to untie the string.

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<sup>7</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978) 48.

In the parcel a small island,  
 On the island a large tree,  
 On the tree a husky fruit.  
 Strip the husk and peel the rind off:  
 In the kernel you will see  
 Blocks of slate enclosed by dappled  
 Red and green, enclosed by tawny  
 Yellow nets, enclosed by white  
 And black acres of dominoes,  
 Where the same brown paper parcel--  
 Children, leave the string alone!  
 For who dares undo the parcel  
 Finds himself at once inside it,  
 On the island, in the fruit,  
 Blocks of slate about his head,  
 Finds himself enclosed by dappled  
 Green and red, enclosed by yellow  
 Tawny nets, enclosed by black  
 And white acres of dominoes,  
 With the same brown paper parcel  
 Still unopened on his knee.  
 And, if he then should dare to think  
 Of the fewness, muchness, rareness,  
 Greatness of this endless only  
 Precious world in which he says  
 He lives--he then unties the string. (CP 30)

Our ongoing efforts to expand our awareness to a more inclusive view of the world do not necessarily lead us closer to that world; they often do no more than replace one "enclosure" (Wittgenstein's "outline") with another. In Graves's poem, the strainings and yearnings of the imagination are dealt with in a buoyant tone, but it is the buoyancy of unflagging curiosity, not of vapid levity. He seems to be trying to think like a child, although the masterful cadences of the poem are far more expressive than those of the average nursery rhyme. Through the tumbling-domino-like descriptive nouns of lines two and three-- "greatness, rareness, muchness, / Fewness"--he evokes the vertiginous feeling of simultaneous plenitude and scarcity

that overcomes a child when he thinks of things like a man holding the world on his shoulders who is supported by two giant tortoises which are standing on....

Like most childhood memories, one's first mind-boggling realization of the concept of infinite regression is bound to be clouded by subsequent rationalizations and perhaps a certain anxious distancing from it. But if my own recollection of that occasion is at all representative, Graves has tried to capture that unfakable sensation of both infinitude and a strange mental limitation that one has when facing this concept with as much concentration as one can muster. A similar evocation of this childhood experience occurs in the passage from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man where Stephen begins to write his address and finds that the universe is the outer limit, and then muses,

"What was after the universe?" Nothing. But was there anything round the universe to show where it stopped before the nothing place began? It could not be a wall but there could be a thin line there all round everything. It was very big to think about everything and everywhere....It made him very tired to think that way. It made him feel his head very big.<sup>8</sup>

In "Warning to Children," Graves re-invests a sense of wonder and apprehension in what is for most adults an irritatingly perplexing crux which is best left to gifted children and astronomers with large research grants. Graves strenuously objects to any philosophical position which does

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<sup>8</sup>James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in The Essential James Joyce (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963) 60.

not take into account the emotional responses, as well as the vested interests, which influence and guide our intellectual investigations. Much of the emotional impact of the poem seems to emanate from the brilliant syntactical placement of "only" at the end of the third line. It throws the sentence slightly off-balance while at the same time emphasizing both the uniqueness and perhaps insignificance ("only"="merely"?) of the "world in which you say/ You live." In his marvellous essay, "A Ramble on Graves,"<sup>9</sup> Lionel Trilling aptly points out the delicate ambiguity of placing "say" at the end of line four, which highlights the speaker's circumspection towards the "children's" perceptions. The stress upon the first syllable of "only" is comparatively lighter than the heavily accented syllables of the final feet of the preceding lines ("to think"; "muchness"). This leads us to place an even stronger emphasis upon the initial syllable of "Endless" which begins line four; and this reinforced stress upon "Endless" brings the problematic infinitude of the conundrum to the forefront. Contrariwise, the reversal of the order of "endless" and "precious" in the final lines of the poem enables the poet to stress the diminishing nature of one's sense of infinitude which may develop along with one's repeated attempts to think about such ideas. Another subtle

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<sup>9</sup>Lionel Trilling, "A Ramble on Graves" in A Gathering of Fugitives (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957) 24.

variation which contributes to the escalating sense of disquietude affecting the speaker is the transition from the active participle "enclosing" of lines six, seven, and eight to the passive "enclosed" of lines seventeen through nineteen. This displays the change from the continuous and explorative nature of the thought-scape to the entrapping and rarefying "precious" nature of the thought-within-a-thought configuration.

"Warning to Children" is one of Graves's most tauntingly ambiguous poems in terms of its tone: it is difficult to assert with any confidence whether or not the speaker is especially anxiety-ridden about our inability to discover the essence of a thing's nature. Dick Davis's observation in Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters may help us to place Graves's poem in perspective: "Though Winters' later work invests its hope in reason, the poet is obviously conscious that reason seems somehow to glance off the world, to be unable to penetrate into the quiddity of things."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Graves's notorious distrust of reason in poetry (e.g., "We never would have loved had love not struck/ Swifter than reason and despite

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<sup>10</sup>Dick Davis, Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983) 146. This is an insight which perhaps owes something to Winters' own lines, "The shyest and most tremulous beings stir,/ The pulsing of their fins a lucent blur,/ That, like illusion, glances off the view." Yvor Winters, "On a View of Pasadena from the Hills," Collected Poems (Denver: Swallow, 1960) 64.



reason" CP 203) as opposed to prose," causes him to be less agitated by the failure of that much-abused faculty to penetrate our physical world. The question of whether Graves is to be praised for possessing a Shakespearean "negative capability," or ridiculed for sweeping aside a fundamental dilemma of the human condition, is partially resolvable by the treatment of an aspect of this failure in "Warning to Children."

The changes that Graves made to the poem between its initial publication in Poems 1926-30 and its next appearance in Collected Poems 1938 are especially interesting because they reveal the painstaking concentration upon modulations of both tone and meaning which were latent in the earlier version. One is tempted to compare Graves's procedures of revision with the actions of a lapidary craftsman, with his persistent cuttings, carvings, polishings, and minute sandings of edges. At times, however, one senses something in Graves's changes to a poem that is more akin to a recasting of the work, as if he threw his material back into the fire. Consider the opening lines of the 1926 version:

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11In the admirable handbook for prose writers, The Reader Over Your Shoulder (New York: Macmillan, 1943), which Graves co-wrote with Alan Hodge, there are numerous warnings to the writer about the pitfalls of the use of overly-figurative language. One section of the book, entitled "The Principles of Clear Statement," includes the advice, "Every unfamiliar subject or concept should be clearly defined; and neither discussed as if the reader knew all about it already nor stylistically disguised" (132).

Children, if you dare to think  
 Of the many largeness, smallness,  
 Fewness of this single only  
 Endless world in which you say  
 You live, you think of things like this--<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the syntactical and rhythmical laxity of the second line in comparison with "Of the greatness, rareness, muchness," one also notices that the nouns in the earlier version refer only to proportion and to number whereas the revised version widens the focus to include qualitative ("greatness") and, in a sense, personal ("precious") considerations. "Muchness" provides an appropriate opposition to "Fewness," while also enhancing the queer "thinginess" of the poem. Even more significant than these adjustments to the opening lines is the heightened involvement, or, if you prefer, the reduced detachment of the speaker in the revised version. The middle section of the poem's earlier version included the lines,

In the acres a brown paper  
 Parcel, leave the sting untied.  
 If you dare undo the parcel  
 You will find yourself inside it,  
 On the island, in the fruit,  
 With the parcel still untied,  
 Just like any lump of slate,

whereas the 1938 version proceeded,

[...]And black acres of dominoes  
 Where the same brown paper parcel--  
 Children, leave the string alone!  
 For who dares undo the parcel  
 Finds himself at once inside it,  
 On the island, in the fruit,  
 Blocks of slate about his head,

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<sup>12</sup>Robert Graves, Poems 1926-30 (London: Heinemann, 1931) 67.

The warning in the earlier version is carried out as though it were learned by rote and as if the speaker were blandly informing the children from a position of disinterested authority. The tone is like that of the fatigued monotone delivery of a flight attendant's instructions regarding emergency evacuation of the plane. The more urgent and engaged tone of the revised version results not only from the addition of an exclamation mark and a direct appeal to the "Children" at the beginning of the line, but also from the sudden halt which interrupts the phrase beginning with "Where," thus enacting the necessary abrupt gesture required to resist one's compulsion. This modulation of tone is central, I believe, to Graves's characteristic drive to demonstrate knowledge in action. This involved knowing is opposed to a pharasaic pontification or the grown-up transmission to the still-growing of admirable but usually ignored precepts.

I have begun my investigation of Graves's treatment of the limitations of knowledge by examining "Warning to Children" because it is a prime example of Graves's quest to understand the ways in which we know. The hunter of knowledge must patiently study the habits and qualities of his quarry without losing sight of the limitations imposed by his own physical shortcomings, including easy susceptibility to weariness and stress, and the limited range of his weapons. Most significant, however, is

Graves's alertness to the emotional counterpart of every intellectual perception: he disdains any knowledge which is touted as uncontingent upon emotion. For this reason, many of his poems refer directly to the bewilderment or astonishment which accompanies either the moment of discovery or the instant of a replenishing reminder of valuable knowledge. The sources of this bewilderment are manifold. On one level, Graves shares an allegiance to the quickening attitude so movingly asserted in Ben Jonson's "Ode to Himself":

Where dost thou so careless lie  
 Buried in ease and sloth?  
 Knowledge, that sleeps, doth die;  
 And this security,  
 It is the common moth,  
 That eats on wits, and arts, and oft destroys them  
 both.<sup>13</sup>

On another level, however, Graves is quite without this Jonsonian confidence, and his bewilderment is caused by a sudden awareness of his own insecurity and recurring gullibility, as we see in poems such as "The Legs" and "To Walk on Hills":

My head dizzied then:  
 I wondered suddenly  
 Might I too be a walker  
 From the knees down?

Gently I touched my shins;  
 The doubt unchained them:  
 They had jumped in twenty puddles  
 Before I regained them. (CP 59)

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<sup>13</sup>Ben Jonson, The Complete Poems, ed. George Parfitt (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975) 160.

Heart records that journey  
 As memorable indeed;  
 Head reserves opinion,  
 Confused by the wind. (CP 85)

Another source of bewilderment in Graves's poetry is what might be best understood as a variety of religious knowing: that is, he sometimes records an ungainsayable personal revelation which is to be believed with ardent faith.<sup>14</sup> Of course, in Graves's case, this faith is patently unorthodox, and sometimes it is plainly hostile to his own Protestant upbringing. Even prior to Graves's much-discussed conversion to his self-delineated religion of the White Goddess, there is a distinct appeal to a type of knowing which eludes rational verification and which is paradoxically proven by the intensity of one's bewilderment, as is the case in the magnificent conclusion of "Pure Death":

....each with shaking hands unlocks  
 The sinister, long, brass-bound coffin-box,

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14A precedent for insisting upon the religious impulses behind some of the poetry of even the most unchurchy of poets in the English tradition--such as Hardy and Graves--is found in some comments of Samuel Hynes: "[poems dealing with] the presence of permanence and value in the humblest particulars of the earth...are not simply celebrations of nature: they are rather about what follows from man's presence in the natural world, and his consciousness of his presence. Poems in the the tradition usually raise the questions that religion is all about--the meaning of suffering, of mortality, and of the powers that shape existence--questions that religions don't answer, but that they help man to make his peace with." "The Hardy Tradition in Modern English Poetry" in Thomas Hardy: The Writer and His Background, ed. Norman Page (New York: St. Martins, 1980).

Unwraps pure death, with such bewilderment  
As greeted our love's first acknowledgement. (CP 48)

I should add that the "bewilderment" of lovers is not always treated with such breathtakingly affirmative celebration, as can be seen in poems such as "The Thieves" and "Never Such Love."

Before I discuss any more poems in detail, it would be helpful to provide a few of Graves's comments upon different types of knowing and their relationship to the making of poems. This may also re-emphasize the importance which Graves places upon the rigorous synthesizing of varying levels of perception and conception which is essential to the poetic process. I will quote first an excerpt from a lecture presented in Poetic Craft and Principle in which Graves relates the story of an unusual childhood experience of knowing:

I received a sudden celestial illumination: it occurred to me that I knew everything. I remember letting my mind range rapidly over all its familiar subjects of knowledge; only to find that this was no foolish fancy....

Yet when Graves tries to consolidate this illuminative state

....all that survived was an after-glow of the bright light in my head, and the certainty that it had been no delusion. This is still with me, for now I realize that what overcame me that evening was a sudden awareness of the power of intuition, the supra-logic that cuts out all routine processes of thought and leaps straight from problem to answer. I did not in fact know everything, but became aware that in moments of real emergency the mind can weigh an infinite mass of imponderables

and make immediate sense of them. This is how poems get written.<sup>15</sup>

This quotation reveals how Graves is prone to a type of self-centeredness which, instead of sounding like mere blustering, somehow manages to show his unabashed enthusiasm for his work. Most significant, of course, is his formulation of the weighing of "an infinite mass of imponderables" and making "immediate sense of them." This establishes the importance for him of the vital activation of certain habitually dormant powers of the mind which is necessary to create a successful poem. If one accuses Graves, quite understandably, of unnecessarily mystifying the poetic process in the previous quotation, as well as in other essays where he refers to the poetic "trance," one should also bear in mind that Graves's poems themselves are rarely trance-like. That is, they never adjure us to "close our eyes in holy dread" in Coleridgean mystic reverence, nor do they attempt to invoke the religious incantatory aura of Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," nor do they present us with a kaleidoscopic assemblage of intriguing images, as do some of Pound's Cantos, from which the reader is left to decode the significant relationships which presumably inform the poet's construction of the whole.

As was mentioned in the first chapter, Graves's poems are not what one customarily thinks of as meditative, as

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Graves, Poetic Craft and Principle (London: Cassell, 1967) 138.

are, for example, the longer poems of Stevens or Eliot, or even some of the longer poems of Edward Thomas, such as "The Other"<sup>16</sup> and "The Chalk-Pit." Yet neither are Graves's poems entirely devoid of the enlivened perceptiveness and heuristic probings that are characteristic of the best meditative verse. As they state in A Survey of Modernist Poetry, Graves and Riding envision poetry as a medium of discovery:

The true scientist should have power equal to the poet's, with the difference that the scientist is inspired to discover things which exist already (his results are facts), while the poet is inspired to discover things which are created by his discovery of them (his results are not statements about things already known to exist, or knowledge, but truths that existed before as potential truths).<sup>17</sup>

In this passage, the poetic process is lucidly described and at the same time, as in the quotation cited in the previous

<sup>16</sup>One rarely finds anything like even the lyrical philosophizing of the speaker in Thomas's "The Other":

Many and many a day like this  
 Aimed at the unseen moving goal  
 And nothing found but remedies  
 For all desire. These made not whole;  
 They sowed a new desire, to kiss  
 Desire's self beyond control,  
 Desire of desire. And yet  
 Life stayed on within my soul.  
 One night in sheltering from the wet  
 I quite forgot I could forget.

Collected Poems (London:Faber, 1965) 175.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Graves and Laura Riding, A Survey of Modernist Poetry in The Common Asphodel (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949) 115.



paragraph, is considered to involve vague potentialities and "imponderables." The indifference toward "statements about things already known to exist, or knowledge" displayed in Graves's and Riding's comments brings to mind an aphorism by e. e. cummings (one of the few American contemporaries, along with Frost and Ransom, admired by Graves): "Knowledge is dead but not buried imagination."<sup>18</sup> For Graves, to know something deeply demands a strenuous effort to bring into being a truth hitherto quiescent, or so underdeveloped that it can be said for all practical purposes not to exist. The sensations of bewilderment and astonishment which are repeatedly revealed as adjuncts to these discoveries are absolutely essential parts of Graves's best poems. Quite often the deftness with which he is able to register the enlivening impact of the moment of knowing is almost inseparable from the memorableness of that which is discovered. The stirrings, quakings, tremors, and shiverings which recur in his poems are not merely neo-Romantic trumpery, nor are they the specious emotional proddings of a romantic thrill-seeker or ecstasy-monger. They are the necessary physical and psychical concomitants to an affecting moment of active knowing.

One of the inevitable obstacles that one encounters when trying to track down a meaningful understanding of the

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<sup>18</sup>e. e. cummings, Six Nonlectures (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1966) 15.

nature of knowing in a poem is the ever-thickening conceptual fog which keeps one from proceeding as though there could truly be an isolatable occasion of knowing, a moment in time and space when the knower assimilates a new and significant understanding of what he desires to know, whether it be an abstract concept, a manual skill, or a person. Given the strident assertiveness with which the word "know" is used in Graves's poems--such as "Down, Wanton, Down!," "The Reader Over My Shoulder," "No More Ghosts," and "The Thieves"--it might be helpful to provide a brief examination of the grammar of the word "know," beginning with a few excerpts from Wittgenstein and one of his commentators, Elizabeth H. Wolgast.

To my knowledge, there are only two articles about Graves which deal explicitly with the philosophical implications of his poetry: J. P. Forester's "The Gravesian Poem: Or Language Ill-treated," and Alan Barker's "Epistemological Ambiguity in the Poetry of Robert Graves." Each of these articles presents a much-needed alternative to the biographical and psychological analyses supplied by most of Graves's best critics; but for the moment I would like to focus on what I judge to be the weakest, or at least the most debatable aspect of Barker's essay, passing quickly over his many insightful remarks. (In his discussion of "Gardener," for example, he astutely emphasizes the importance of the gardener's "not-knowing in the ordinary

sense"<sup>19</sup>--"a hairy-belly shrewdness/ That would appraise the intentions of angel/ By the very yardstick of his own confusion,/ And bring the most to pass." CP 60) In his analysis of "Sick Love," Barker rather cursorily summarizes previous critical responses to the poem as "fatalistically pessimistic," and contends that "a sensitive reading shows that moral judgement must be suspended before the deliberate complexity of the poem."<sup>20</sup> One need not take issue with his claim for the "deliberate complexity" of "Sick Love," but it is hard to accept that a poem which exhorts "Love" to "be fed," "Take delight," "Lift [its] head" and "Walk between dark and dark" inhibits the reader's ability to engage in a moral assessment of the poem. I suspect that a certain amount of the difficulty in arriving at a moral judgement of this work, as well as a few other of Graves's poems, is related to how particular types of knowing are to be used. Let me quote two passages: the first is taken from Elizabeth H. Wolgast's "Examples of What One Knows," and the second from Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations:

In a discussion of a classroom "hands-up"-for-the-answer situation, Wolgast observes:

Here 'I know' means roughly: 'I have learned it and not forgotten,' or 'I can do it as I'm

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<sup>19</sup>Alan Barker, "Epistemological Ambiguity in the Earlier Poetry of Robert Graves" Journal of the Australian Universities Language and Literature Association 59 (May 1983) 69.

<sup>20</sup>Barker, 185.

supposed to.' One may know a variety of things in this way, first aid and criminal law and calculus, for instance. And the use of 'know' with respect to these reflects nothing more or less than the ability to respond in certain way. It does not, for example, reflect a degree of certainty or possession of evidence.<sup>21</sup>

You say to me: 'You understand this expression, don't you? Well, then--I am using it in the sense you are familiar with.' --As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application. If, for example, someone says that the sentence 'This is here' (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense.<sup>22</sup>

In considering the second excerpt, one first has to decide if it is at all possible, or relevant for that matter, to speak in terms of the "special circumstances" of a poem. "This is here" might be used in reference to an object that someone else does not notice (as when one has misplaced one's keys and cannot believe that they are in plain view to another person who asserts "They are here"). Yet as soon as one shifts from examining an ostensibly simple sentence to exploring the manifoldly complicated utterance of a poem, which is often constructed of exhortations, metaphorical observations, and puns, it may seem ludicrous to refer to the "special circumstances" of the poem in which it is "used." However, it appears equally

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<sup>21</sup>Elizabeth H. Wolgast, "Examples of What One Knows" in The Philosophy of Wittgenstein, vol. 8, ed. and introd. John V. Canfield (New York: Garland Press, 1986) 92.

<sup>22</sup>Wittgenstein, 48.

absurd to assume that in trying to understand a poem, one does not engage in many of the same mental activities as one does when attempting to understand the statement "This is here. " One of these activities may well include an assessment of the usefulness of the utterance. I realize that I have switched from referring to the circumstances in which a poem may be used to referring to its usefulness, but in making this switch I hope to retain the idea that there are reasons for suggesting plausible circumstances in which a poem could be "used," granted, that is, that we ever refer to an attitude presented in a poem as useless, or perhaps even dangerous.

In the case of "Sick Love," it appears that there is not so much a call for the "suspension of moral judgement" as there is an informed and courageous avoidance of conventional or moralistic judgements: what the poet now knows is used to encourage "Love" to "Walk between dark and dark" despite the risks involved. The "special circumstances" delineated in the poem include the speaker's awareness that carnal love is of its nature "tainted" by realities such as mortality, apprehensiveness, and an indomitable bestial urgency. Yet the poignant hesitancy engendered by these circumstances does not paralyze the speaker: it ultimately urges him towards action which is at least as considered and direct as Herrick's "Gather Ye Rosebuds" ("but use your time/ And while ye may, go marry");

"O Love, be fed with apples while you may"). There are unquestionably ambiguous resonances in "Sick Love"--the title alone puts a blight upon the otherwise spotlessly encouraging and joyful exhortation of the opening two lines--but the poem does not invite us to "suspend moral judgement" in the face of the irresolvable ambiguities of human love. Rather, it commands us to "Walk between dark and dark," not in defiantly amoral recklessness, but in the firm knowledge of both its "shining" and its unpeaceful nature. This knowledge is used by the speaker as something of a talisman against the ruefulness that can sour one's remembrance of past love,<sup>23</sup> as well as used as an explicit reminder that sexual love is "That shivering glory not to be despised," an awareness which is no meager triumph coming from a poet who in another poem referred to a post-coital couple as "Loathing each other's carrion company" ("The Beast" Poems 1938-45, 5). In objecting to Douglas Day's comment that the poem presents a sense of "doomed ecstasy,"<sup>24</sup> Barker asserts that the "tempestuousness" of love "is rightfully a cause, not of despair, but of celebration," which is understandable. Yet the sense of

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<sup>23</sup>A lighter and less forceful variation on this theme occurs in "Advocates" where the speaker asserts: "You shall be advocates/ Charged to deny all the good I lived with them is lost" (CP 104).

<sup>24</sup>Douglas Day, Swifter Than Reason (Chapel Hill: U of N. Carolina P, 1963) 139.

celebration is not one which emerges from any "suspension of moral judgement," but comes instead from a sense of committed moral action in which the cost is counted and one is willing to sacrifice "peace" for a "shining space."

Although one can find instances in Graves's poetry (e.g., "The Shot," "The Ages of Oath," "The Cuirassiers of the Frontier") of the kind of staunch and bracing moral confidence one sees in Ben Jonson's lines, "Not to know vice at all, and keep true state,/ Is virtue, and not fate,"<sup>25</sup> more often one encounters a confidence which is promoted by less ascetic principles. Graves's more exhaustive and morally suspect approaches are wittily outlined by the speaker in the early poem "Reassurance to the Satyr" (Poems 1926-30, 47), in which the "red-bearded wild, white-bearded mild,/ Black-bearded merry" shepherd responds to the satyr's mistrust of his "ill-assorted" features with the theory,

And what other shepherds know but singly  
 And easily at the first sight or touch  
 (Who follow a straight nose and who smile even)  
 I know with labor and most amply:  
 I know each possible lie and bias  
 That crookedness can cozen out of straightness.  
 Satyr, you need not shrink.

The tone of this poem is mischievous, but that is not sufficient reason to dismiss the ways in which the tri-color-bearded shepherd knows "with labor and most amply." Many of Graves's poems are insistent upon the difficulty involved in truly knowing anything; and more importantly,

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<sup>25</sup>Ben Jonson, "Epode," 107.

they confirm the value which inheres in experiencing deeply the processes of doubt. They display the siftings of half-knowledge and conjecture; as well as the weighing of counter-arguments which he often views as the necessary prerequisite to establishing the validity of what one knows.

During Graves's poetically most fertile years--1922 to 1945--one encounters poems which, without explicitly plunging into the complexities of urban social and political life, attend to the seriousness of the prevailing emotional and intellectual confusion of the time from a personal standpoint that only occasionally seems escapist or isolationist. Graves is concerned primarily with developing an inner discipline to cope with the well-documented post-war despair which other poets seemed to believe demanded external political, cultural, and even religious reorganization before any personal recuperation could begin. Central to his desire for self-mastery is a constant self-criticism. It is sometimes accompanied, unfortunately, by the sickening egotism of the inveterate self-chastiser. Nevertheless, it is a desire which, in its most ennobling manifestations, reveals the recurrent misgivings, the apparently wasted efforts, and the frustrating insolences which must be confronted in the attempts to attain at least temporary mental and emotional stability in tough situations.

The staggering doubts and the wearisome indeterminacies



endured by a vigorous thinker are not altogether swept aside by Graves, but he seldom allows them to harden into an excuse for philosophical dereatism, and he never endorses cure-all political or religious solutions. His best work attempts to acknowledge the complexities, both the petty and the sublime, of a given situation, and then to show that however partial, biased, or saddening our perceptions may be, they are the best we can currently muster; they are, after all, what we rely upon as our working assumptions in our daily lives. If Graves does not believe in the perfectibility of man, he at least sees the need to recognize the range and perilousness of man's imperfection and near-sightedness so that he can try to develop some notion of his duty to seek self-knowledge. Small self-improvements are possible; but backslidings and forgetfulness of past lessons are sly opponents to which Graves repeatedly bears witness in his poetry.

The requirement that one ought to know genuinely what one purports to know before sounding-off about it is followed with a refreshingly witty earnestness in a number of Graves's best poems, including "The Thieves," "Love at First Sight," "Never Such Love," "Change," "Certain Mercies," and (probably most memorably) in the elegantly anti-dogmatic "In Broken Images":

He is quick, thinking in clear images;  
I am slow, thinking in broken images.

He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;

I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.

Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;  
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.  
(CP 60)

Whether one reads this poem as an attack upon Graves's alter-ego or upon the methods and the outlook of the incurably self-assured, the incisive wit and wordplay of the antiphonal stanzas certainly amount to more than the "quite haphazard" arrangement that Ronald Hayman sees. Hayman asserts that the poem's "only incentive to go [on] seems to be the hope of finding phrases to echo phrases or to balance opposites against them."<sup>26</sup> Alan Barker argues cogently against Hayman's position by emphasizing that the quiet dispute between the two methods is subtly dramatized by the use of "He" and "I" and that the "I" is not "restricted within a subject-object dualism, but recognizes the mutual dependency of subject and object."<sup>27</sup> I am essentially in agreement with Barker's argument; however, I would stress the significance of the newness of "I"'s understanding of his confusion. This "new understanding" is only valuable insofar as one remains aware that it is new, and that another new understanding may, and presumably should, supplant it before it takes on the false fixedness of a "clear" image.

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<sup>26</sup>Ronald Hayman, "Robert Graves," Essays in Criticism January, 1955: 42.

<sup>27</sup>Barker, 79.

## II

The opportunities for providing ostensibly clear yet potentially misleading or self-delusive images are multiplied when someone attempts to write intelligently about passionate human relationships. This distortion may be so great that one may find oneself, when reading certain fervent poems, moving from muted assent to qualified dissent regarding the plausibility of the speaker's intense emotions. What is it exactly, we may ask, that permits the speaker to attest so vehemently to the depth and sincerity of his feelings? Graves, perhaps more so than any other poet of his time, makes ardent protestations of the transfiguring confidence that may be possessed by a person who knows deeply that he is experiencing true love. This kind of knowing is infinitely more difficult to evaluate than the "new understanding of confusion" delineated by the poet of "In Broken Images." It is as though one is left to proceed like Hamlet's mother, enquiring "why seems it so particular with thee" in the hope of discovering something that denotes emotion truly, or of finding some proof that the speaker indeed has "that within which passes show" (I, ii, 85). One such example of this dilemma confronts the reader of "Change":

'This year she has changed greatly'---meaning you--  
My sanguine friends agree,  
And hope thereby to reassure me.

No, child, you never change; neither do I.  
 Indeed all our lives long  
 We are still fated to do wrong,

Too fast caught by care of humankind  
 Easily vexed and grieved,  
 Foolishly flattered and deceived;

And yet each knows that the changeless other  
 Must love and pardon still,  
 Be the new error what it will:

Assured by that same glint of deathlessness  
 Which neither can surprise  
 In any other pair of eyes.        (CP 305)

The poem is a brilliantly miniaturized characterization of the lame encouragement given, and flimsy compensatory gestures made, by friends from their supposedly objective standpoints. The simple fact that they stand to lose little themselves in this situation, and perhaps even regain their friend's deflected intimacy, calls into question their sincerity and reminds one of the virtually worthless nature of their "sanguine" percipience. Accordingly, the speaker doesn't waste his breath arguing with his friends; rather, the poem is directed towards the estranged or ill-behaved woman. That the offence, or her worsening behaviour, is not explicitly mentioned is perhaps further evidence of their relative unimportance to the speaker. The friends' riskless remarks do serve a purpose, however, in that they spark the reader to consider what most emphatically hasn't changed in his relationship with the woman, namely, "that same glint of deathlessness/ Which neither can surprise/ In any other pair of eyes." A lot of the persuasiveness of this particular

argument depends upon a combination of one's acceptance of the quite intangible "glint"; the inevitability of the lovers' wrongs which we are told they are "fated" to do; and the unstated magnitude of these wrongs which cause the vexation and grief. That an increased irritability arising from being "too fast caught by care of humankind" need not indicate a change of heart, but merely mark the regrettable vulnerability of long-term love relationships to quotidian anxieties, is understandable. Yet at what point can the "changeless other" be reasonably expected not to "love and pardon still/ Be the new error what it will"? In other words, it is not clear whether the poet is affirming that their love conquers all or that it is merely capable of sustaining repeated minor transgressions.

As admirable as the forgiving and independent attitude displayed in "Change" may be, one may find oneself resisting something in the poem. Part of the problem may be related to the type of criticism made by Yvor Winters in his examination of the sudden change at the conclusion of Shakespeare's twenty-ninth sonnet ("When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes"). Referring to the optimistic turn in the concluding couplet: "...For thy sweet love rememb' red such wealth brings/ That then I scorn to change my state with kings," Winters observes that "this is a sentimental, almost automatic change. It is what I have

previously called an evasion of the issue posed."<sup>28</sup> Craves may not be evading the issue posed in his poem, but since he uses his friends' "sanguine" remarks as a more or less straw-man position at which to aim his response, one hopes for a rendering of something more elaborate than a "glint of deathlessness" to oppose the impressionistic nature of his friends' assessment. Nevertheless, there is something tantalizingly persuasive in the resilient belief that only one person can elicit that sensation of spontaneous glittering liveliness, "Which neither can surprise/ In any other pair of eyes."

Whether "Change" is damagingly sentimental or maturely romantic may depend on the "glint" of the beholder. Yet there is a straightforwardness and unmannered rhetorical control in the poem which represent an achievement in themselves. Moreover, the daring self-sufficiency of a line such as "And yet each knows that the changeless other" is not entirely reckless. It does not rule out the very real possibility of a type of emotional assurance which holds more sway in our formative decisions than we might normally admit for fear of sounding affected or naive.

The insistent and brashly affirmative tone of "Change," as well as of poems such as "Despite and Still" (CP 127) and "Seldom Yet Now" (CP 213), seems to have its basis in

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<sup>28</sup>Yvor Winters, Forms of Discovery (Denver: Swallow, 1967) 60.

Graves's desire to convey the strength of the speaker's deeply felt convictions. Graves's success in making these kinds of passionate declarations both credible and intriguing usually depends upon a careful intermixture of predominantly plain diction with vigorous--but seldom jarring--syntactical and metrical arrangements. Once again, how one manifests what one knows is at least as important as what it is that one knows. As dangerous as it may be to challenge an author's sincerity regarding the presentation of a firm emotional conviction, Graves's poems sometimes invite this kind of challenge because one finds little room to argue with such strenuous protestations without eventually questioning the grounds for the intensity of the emotion itself. This may occur when reading "The Presence" (quoted here in full), a poem which begins with a rancorous rejoinder to an unreflective and conventional thought or remark about a loved one's death:

Why say 'death'? Death is neither harsh nor kind  
 Other pleasures or pains could hold the mind  
 If she were dead. For dead is gone indeed,  
 Lost beyond recovery and need,  
 Discarded, ended, rotted underground--  
 Of whom no personal feature could be found  
 To stand out from the soft blur evenly spread  
 On memory, if she were truly dead.

But living still, barred from accustomed use  
 Of body and dress and motion, with profuse  
 Reproaches (since this anguish of her grew  
 Do I still love her as I swear I do?)  
 She fills the house and garden terribly  
 With her bewilderment, accusing me,  
 Till every stone and flower, table and book,  
 Cries out her name, pierces me with her look,  
 'You are deaf, listen!

You are blind, see!'

How deaf or blind,  
When horror of the grave maddens the mind  
With those same pangs that lately choked her breath,  
Altered her substance, and made sport of death. (CP 40)

The rhetorical energy of the opening stanza is impressive, and it is not surprising that D. N. G. Carter, in his book on Graves, should cite it as evidence against Graves's most dismissive critics such as C. H. Sisson and Anthony Burgess who accuse his poetry of rhythmical flaccidity. However, if one examines the entire poem, it is not a foregone conclusion, as Carter would have it, that the "turbulent rhythms, emotionalising the dialectic, as they thrust it on, immediately assert the urgency of reality, not imitation."<sup>29</sup> A closer inspection of the poem, especially of the second stanza, reveals a signal lack of particularized physical description. Even given that Graves's worst poetry has all the succulence of a tongue depressor, the absence of any arresting concrete detail in "The Presence" undermines the alleged pervasiveness of the poet's anguished memory of the deceased woman.

The most discouraging aspect of "The Presence" is the conventional and "literary" nature of the presentation of the poet's grief ("Discarded, ended, rotted underground" is the one vivid exception to this point) which is being so vehemently asserted throughout the poem. The flatness of

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<sup>29</sup>D. N. G. Carter, Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement (London: Macmillan, 1989) 12.



the poem's emotional effect is readily discernible if one compares it with almost any of Hardy's Poems 1912-13, which are about a real, and, more important, deeply felt and considered loss. In "The Presence," we have only the poet's anguished and frustrated state which is triggered by the bland tokens of "every stone and flower, table and book," whereas in Hardy's poems we are given glimpses of tangible past joys--"the alley of bending boughs/ Where so often at dusk you used to be"<sup>30</sup>--as well as the felt and visualized presence of the woman--"with your nut-coloured hair";<sup>31</sup> "as I knew you then,/ Even to the original air-blue gown!"<sup>32</sup> In Hardy's poems, the lovingly recollected and selected physical details of the beloved are not merely ornaments affixed to the argument of the poet's grief: they are evidence of the woman's profoundly captivating presence--her gait; her features; her personality; her mysteriousness. This kind of revivifying detail is sadly lacking in Graves's poem, so much so, that one may feel in this case that the poet "protests too much."

In "The Presence," as well as in far too many of the love poems from Graves's later volumes, the poet's protean artistic egotism works against his own interests. This is

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<sup>30</sup>Thomas Hardy, "The Going," Selected Poems (Markham: Penguin, 1978) 370.

<sup>31</sup>Hardy, "After a Journey," 381.

<sup>32</sup>Hardy, "The Voice," 378.

partly the result of an aggressive rhetorical ingenuity which elbows out feelings which are either too weak or indistinct to offer resistance to the merely verbal force. The dashing gentlemanliness of the argumentation of the later poems, for instance, leaves the reader searching for honest emotion among the suave attitudinizings: "My love for you, though true, wears the extravagance of centuries;/ Your love for me is fragrant, simple, and millennial" ("Compact," CP 398). And the obtrusive egotism that spoils some of Graves's poems can sometimes cause one to move precipitously from analyzing a given poem to generalizing about Graves-the-biographical-specimen, thus losing sight of some of the distinctive qualities of the individual poem.<sup>33</sup> There is a remarkably strong sense of self in a great many of Graves's poems, even those in which individual expression is

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<sup>33</sup>Martin Seymour-Smith, for example, views Graves's marvellous poem "A Love Story" as an instance of Graves "looking at his relationship with Riding in long perspective, and with an end to it in mind." (324) Douglas Day, in a far more damaging overgeneralization, wrongly concludes from Graves's typical witty cynicism towards the body in poems such as "Down, Wanton, Down" and "The Thieves" that the final stanza of "Certain Mercies" should lead us to believe "that we should not be grateful ["that all satisfaction/ Appear mere mitigation/ Of an accepted curse"]; that, even though the spirit's fate is lifelong imprisonment in our vile and craven body, we ought on no account accept meekly the meagre recompenses for such a fate, but ought instead to maintain an implacable hatred for our jailer. As G. S. Fraser comments, Graves's 'common attitude to the body, to its lusts, to its energies, to its mortality, to the clogging foreign weight that hangs about him is a ... somber one.'" Day ignores how Graves, in the final stanza of "Certain Mercies," complicates our conventional disdain for the body by resisting the corresponding tendency to "pamper" the spirit.

vaguely concealed or ostensibly widened by the use of the first person plural, as in "The Cool Web," "Certain Mercies," and "Lost Acres." The different selves in Graves's poems are rarely the easily identifiable and discrete personae of the kind we encounter in Eliot's "Gerontion," Yeats's "Crazy Jane" poems, or even Yeats's "The Wild Old Wicked Man," where the randy sage speaking in the poem reflects:

'That some stream of lightning  
 From an old man in the skies  
 Can burn out that suffering  
 No right-taught man denies.  
 But a coarse old man am I,  
 I choose the second-best,  
 I forget all awhile  
 Upon a woman's breast.<sup>34</sup>

Graves has little interest in the effects to be achieved by poetic ventriloquizing: one of the most intriguing aspects of his variegated poetic canon is that Graves rarely gives the reader cause to believe that it is not the poet himself who is speaking, despite the widely divergent tones he creates with a minimum of mannerisms. The key to this ability seems to be related in some fashion to his carefully layered use of ironic modes. An incautious use of any variety of irony--including verbal, situational, and dramatic irony, as so sensitively explored and provisionally labelled by D. C. Muecke in The Compass of Irony (1969)--can effect a separation between the writer and

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<sup>34</sup>William Butler Yeats, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1982) 358.

the thing written. Consequently, this separation all too often signals a guarded aloofness or a comfortably urbane irresponsibility. In the Yeats stanza quoted above, for instance, there is what one assumes to be a type of dramatic irony set in motion, yet it seems one in which we are encouraged to condone the home-spun wisdom of the "wicked" codger and at the same time to affirm our nobler--hence idealistic and impotent--"right-taught" knowledge. A wider reading of Yeats leads us to believe that the old man's view is heartily endorsed. Yet one can't help but feel that as invigorating as the wild old wicked man's prescription may be, it smacks of the sort of perspective which Larkin characterized as an "audacious, purifying, / Elemental move" which seems "Such a deliberate step backwards"<sup>35</sup>--for the readers and Yeats, that is, not necessarily for the old man.

Graves's most characteristic type of irony is not the sort which employs distanced personae, but is rather that of a person whose hard-won knowledge is from lived, not imagined experience (if such a distinction may be meaningfully made concerning a poet). This knowledge is conveyed partly as advice, partly as warning, and, most importantly, partly as encouragement to alert and responsible participation in experiences which are worthwhile in spite of their dangers. In a certain sense,

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<sup>35</sup>Philip Larkin, Collected Poems (New York: Farrar, 1989) 85.

they are worthwhile because of the necessary, if saddening ironic awareness which is promoted only by first-hand experience of these dangers. The self, in Graves's best poems, operates as more than a sympathetic observer of humankind's or even his own personal woes and delusions. The self is portrayed as an active agent, who is alternately naive and wary. The most successful example of Graves's high-resolution irony, where the ironic viewpoints reflect upon each other without blurring the clarity of the whole picture, is probably "The Thieves":

Lovers in the act dispense  
 With such meum-tuum sense  
 As might warningly reveal  
 What they must not pick or steal,  
 And their nostrum is to say:  
 'I and you are both away.'

After, when they disentwine  
 You from me and yours from mine,  
 Neither can be certain who  
 Was that I whose mine was you.  
 To the act again they go  
 More completely not to know.

Theft is theft and raid is raid  
 Though reciprocally made.  
 Lovers, the conclusion is  
 Doubled sighs and jealousies  
 In a single heart that grieves  
 For lost honour among thieves. (CP 123)

The ethics and metaphysics of sexual love are so suavely handled in this poem that at first the wit overshadows the subject matter, and the poem may appear to be little more than a charming trifle. The sombre and serious religious connotations of meum and tuum (mine and thine) are almost entirely banished as a result of the

bouncy rhythm of the opening two lines, but the third line introduces a less captious and less mocking tone by adjusting the stress of the predominantly four-beat, seven-syllable line so that a strong emphasis is placed upon the second and third syllables, thus offsetting the jaunty movement of the preceding two lines. Most of the couplets in the poem function in the manner of a well-timed comedy team where the straight-man line sets up the acerbic retort of the funny-man line; yet they operate in such a way, as in the most memorable comedic routines, that neither the straight-man nor the funny-man has quite the whole picture, nor does one have a more indisputably satisfying perspective than the other. Consider the relative seriousness with which one could utter any of the first lines of the couplets in stanza two in comparison with the patently mischievous tone that would almost certainly creep into any recitation of the second lines of the couplets. However, the dextrous balance of the poem is not mere show-offishness: the enjambed final couplets of the poem point to an evaluation of the baffling experience in a tone which is not solely facetious, and, which in fact quite poignantly displays the mutual pain which is suffered in the course of the lovers' inevitable efforts to sort through their perceived emotional losses and gains. The notion of "a single heart that grieves" is a moving witness to the unavoidable mutuality of love, in its shared regrets and mistrusts as well as in its

"unknowing" acts.

The "self" in "The Thieves" is one which is as much, if not more, concerned with itself than with other selves: the loving self is never far removed from the self-lover in Graves's poetry. The predominant action which keeps the resurgently egotistical self in many of Graves's love poems from degenerating into flagrant narcissism is his unabashed worship of the beloved. This religious veneration of the woman has its obvious inane extremes in the worst of his White Goddess poems; but in the love poems which make no explicit use of the Goddess props, the everyday worship of the woman emerges as an honest and delicate regard for her enigmatic composure. One of the most strikingly tender poems which manages to capture something of this reflective respect for the mysterious gentleness of women is "Like Snow":

She, then, like snow on a dark night,  
Fell secretly. And the world waked  
With dazzling of the drowsy eye,  
So that some muttered 'Too much light',  
And drew the curtains close.  
Like snow, warmer than fingers feared,  
And to soil friendly;  
Holding the histories of the night  
In yet unmelted tracks.        (CP 111)

This is about as close as Graves ever gets to Symbolism. Although the title itself provides a straightforward preparation for the similes which are to follow, and although each likeness is given a brief elaboration of its significance, there is a suggestiveness about these similes

which indicates a connection between the woman and the snow which is not fully exhausted by the inference elucidated in the poem. For instance, in what sense are we to read "Fell secretly"? The reader's inability to satisfy his demand for the literal sense of this line does not, it seems to me, in this case indicate a serious flaw in the poem. As in so many of his love poems, "Like Snow" presents the recognition of the amazement and surprise (and sometimes fear) which accompanies one's attempts to understand one's beloved. The importance for Graves of how we come to know things is hinted in line six, "Like snow, warmer than fingers feared," where the discovery is made by the simple physical contact which dispels one's mistaken apprehensions. The appropriateness of this image is even better appreciated when one notices in Graves's manuscript that the line initially read "warmer than the eye feared."

As delicately observant and unself-centered as the speaker of "Like Snow" may be, it would be misleading to suggest that the tone of this poem is representative of that of Graves's other love poems. But while one may sympathize in part with Donald Davie's opinion that Graves's poems have a "toneless voice,"<sup>36</sup> this opinion becomes unsatisfying when one begins applying it to a larger group of his poems like "The Legs" ("Might I too be a walker/ From the knees

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<sup>36</sup>Donald Davie, "The Toneless Voice of Robert Graves," Listener 62 (1959): 11.



down?"), "Pure Death" ("We looked, we loved, and therewith instantly/ Death became terrible to you and me") and "Down, Wanton, Down!" Graves's poems are only toneless in the sense that they seldom display what might be called a ready-made tone; the speaker in many of his best poems seems so ardently present in his words that one hesitates to assume that the listener could be addressed, or the subject matter treated more appropriately, in any other tone. Rather than the speaker somewhat speciously adopting a tone toward his subject, quite often the tone in Graves's poems seems to emerge from the poetic discovery itself, and in this sense Graves's poems do appear to operate in the manner of the "life-giving forms" described by Bachelard. One of the odd things about Graves's relatively dry tone, however, is that unlike that of poets such as Auden and Empson, both of whom seem to have learned something from his blending of colloquial phrases and poetic inversions, Graves's tone is rarely intelligent-sounding without being demonstrably and clearly intelligent. Graves does not write poems which merely sound clever. Compare, for instance, "Sick Love" with Auden's "Watch any day"; or Empson's "Legal Fiction" with "Lost Acres." Graves is usually able to avoid the nudging cleverness to which Auden and Empson too often succumb.

The speakers in Graves's poems do not, at least in any ordinary sense, play with words, nor do they meander through

stanza after stanza leaving sly phrases behind them as in Auden's later poetry. Graves's probing and explorative poetic voice indicates a decidedly personal searching for what can be known, but it is far more terse than the admirably inclusive and predominantly inquisitive and reflective voice of Eliot's Four Quartets, or the sinuously imaginative voice of Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West." Graves's particular innovations with a poetic voice are much more a matter of the slight tonal modulations of the speaker, and especially modulations which result from the incorrigibly physical self to which poetic utterance must be bound.

**Chapter Three**  
**Part II**

**Knowing in Your Bones:  
Graves and the Body**

It is important not only not to run down and degrade everything earthly, but just because of its temporariness, which it shares with us, we ought to grasp and transform these phenomena and these things in a most loving understanding.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The "I" in so many of Graves's poems is an "I" who has hands, ears, eyes, and a throat and a nose , with all of their corresponding pleasures, pains, and sensitivities. If my experience of reading Graves is at all representative, one can read his poems with interest and enjoyment for some time without noticing the sturdy physicality of his speakers (except, of course, in poems like "Rocky Acres," "Trudge, Body," or "The Legs" where the emboldened toughness and intractability of the body is discussed in the very subject matter of the poem). References to the physical reality of the body are seldom dragged into a poem merely to tie the argument down or to illustrate an intellectual point. As walk-taking, household-chore-doing, lovemaking and window-gazing physical beings, we are continually gathering information and receiving sensations which impinge in various ways upon our intellectual predispositions. Apart from the poems which deal explicitly with the rewards and miseries of inhabiting a mortal body, there are dozens of poems where the awareness of being in the body--whether by Graves's artful design or simply as result of his temperament--is clearly demonstrated without drawing undue attention to itself. Thus, the "I" in many of Graves's poems is perhaps as much a construct of adjusted emotional attitudes toward an experience as it is a composite of relatively unsensuous references to the body, or even to surrounding bodies.

This awareness is probably what moderates the explicit boastfulness and potentially disabling arrogance of a poem like "The Reader Over My Shoulder"--"What now, old enemy, shall you do/ But quote and underline, thrusting yourself/ Against me, as ambassador of myself,/ In damned confusion of myself and you" (CP 58). A considerable amount of the irony of the poem resides in the double-edged nature of the concluding lines, "Know me, have done: I am a proud spirit/ And you for ever clay," because this selfsame "proud spirit" has so plainly shown its troubled physicality in the opening stanza: "peering beneath/ My writing arm--I suddenly feel your breath/ Hot upon my hand or nape." The inclusion of relatively commonplace (yet rarely openly acknowledged) physical sensations in many of Graves's poems has a variety of effects, not least of which is a strengthening of the speaker's urge to referentiality, which is so often deflected or diminished by an overzealously "interpretative" reader. Admittedly, Graves's poems are rarely so unequivocal that one could not spend a certain amount of time debating the connotative scope of a given word or phrase, but the recurrent references to the body do seem to function in a way that increases the mimetic power of his poems, situating the speaker closer to experience that involves real risks and repercussions. The choices made by the speakers in his poems are less like merely postulated or speculated ones because of the stabilizing references to the

alternately mundane and rousing physicality of human life.

Given the comparatively unsensuous imagery which we most commonly find in Graves's poems, we might conclude that Graves is not as alert to his non-human physical surroundings as poets like Hopkins, Hardy, Edward Thomas, and William Carlos Williams, and — so far as minutely particularized adjectival descriptions are taken as signs of a poet's attentiveness to his environment, we would be justified in doing so. Yet, for Graves, his surroundings are never characterized by generous verbal portraits of enthralling vistas (as in Hopkins's "My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,/ Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun" and "the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder/ Majestic--as a stallion stalwart, very-violet sweet!")<sup>37</sup> nor by the sort of itemized lists of the ambivalent fecundity of urban life as presented by Williams in Paterson (e.g., "And silk spins from the hot drums to a music/ of pathetic souvenirs, a comb and nail-file/ in an imitation leather case").<sup>38</sup> Graves's immediate environment, which for him decisively begins with the body in which he lives and its closest physical contingencies, is

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<sup>37</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Binsley Poplars" and "Hurrahing in Harvest" in Selected Poems and Prose ed. W. H. Gardner (Markham: Penguin, 1983) 39, 31.

<sup>38</sup>William Carlos Williams, Paterson (New York: New Directions, 1963) 37.

his overwhelming concern. His interest in his intimate surroundings--or, to attempt to re-invest a pop-psychology cliché with meaning, his "personal space"--provides as much of a grounding in the non-abstract world as does the interest in much more expansive local and international space exhibited in the work of many of his poetic contemporaries, such as Stevens, Eliot, and Yeats, as well as in his predecessors such as Hardy and Thomas. With a noticeable lack of elaborate physical detail, Graves is nevertheless able to present a firm physicality in his poetry by never completely "ruling out [the] distractions of the body," to borrow a phrase from "The Philosopher" (CP 81).

The "I" of many of Graves's poems is often rendered by a clear indication of some specific physical qualities, whether it is in the guise of the swaggering Samson, whose commanding muscularity is demonstrated by "the gates of well-walled Gaza,/ A-clank to [his] stride" (CP 21); or the haunted woman of "The Pier-glass" where the mirror reflects her image, "melancholy and pale, as faces grow that look in mirrors" (CP 19); or the apprehensive lover in "The Straw," who, in a time of apparent peace, asks "Then why/ This tremor of the straw between my fingers?" (CP 173). The speakers in his poems are presented in such a way that they do not seem just to think and emote; rather, they frequently experience the world in tangible, physical fashions. In



attempting to demonstrate some of the subtle ways in which Graves is able to achieve this, it will be helpful to compare a few of his poems with the work of an equally accomplished poet, Edward Thomas.

#### IV

Provided that we remain aware of the striking exceptions to any generalization about the receding physical presence of the speaker in Thomas's poems, namely, "The Owl," "As the team's head brass," and "Adlestrop," to mention the most obvious examples, we can see that, in comparison with Graves's poems, several of Thomas's best poems are much more involved with the subtle movements of thought and feeling than with the body which must live with them. What is most interesting, of course, is how each poet is able to breathe life into his utterance in a distinctly different fashion. In Graves's poems, the references to the physical presence of the speaker or addressee are deployed in such a way that they seem almost incidental. These references have more of an accumulated impact than individually extractable and discrete significance. Consider, for instance, the way in which the potentially abstract subject "Love," in "Sick Love," is implored to "feel the sun," "Be warm," and to "lift [its] head" (CP 49), or how the succinct list of light-hearted gestures in the

final stanza of "It Was All Very Tidy" so adeptly renders the paralyzed terror of the speaker: "I could not bring myself/ To laugh, or untie/ His beard's neat ribbons,/ Or whistle, or sing" (CP 50). Contrariwise, physical gestures in Thomas's work are often imbued with the utmost significance, as is the plucking of the potent-smelling herb in "Old Man," which sends the poet into a fascinatingly introspective musing where he "lies in wait,/ For what I should, yet never can, remember:/ No garden appears . . . only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end."<sup>39</sup>

It is as if there is a physical restlessness and impatience with too much thinking about things which Graves conveys by the brief, sketchy reminders of our corporeal existence. If we compare his "On Rising Early" with Thomas's "The Glory," we notice how in the latter, the nature of the considerations which are set in motion by the poet's recognition of the beauty of the morning is much more far-reaching and freely emotional (e.g., "and the dove/That tempts me on to something sweeter than love"; "the sublime vacancy/ Of sky and meadow and forest and my own heart")<sup>40</sup> than the brisk gratitude for the pleasantness of the early morning expressed in Graves's line "And nothing anywhere ill or noticeable/--Thanks indeed for that" (CP 64). Here are

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<sup>39</sup>Edward Thomas, Selected Poems and Prose, ed. David Wright (Markham: Penguin, 1981) 171.

<sup>40</sup>Thomas, 217.

the two poems in full:

The glory of the beauty of the morning,--  
 The cuckoo crying over the untouched dew;  
 The blackbird that has found it, and the dove  
 That tempts me on to something sweeter than love;  
 White clouds ranged even and fair as new mown hay;  
 The heat, the stir, the sublime vacancy  
 Of sky and meadow and forest and my own heart:--  
 The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning  
 All I can ever do, all I can be,  
 Beside the lovely of motion, shape, and hue,  
 The happiness I fancy fit to dwell  
 In beauty's presence. Shall I now this day  
 Begin to seek as far as heaven, as hell,  
 Wisdom or strength to match this beauty, start  
 And tread the pale dust pitted with small dark drops,  
 In hope to find whatever it is I seek,  
 Harkening to short-lived happy-seeming things  
 That we know naught of, in the hazel copse?  
 Or must I be content with discontent  
 As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?  
 And shall I ask at the day's end once more  
 What beauty is, and what I can have meant  
 By happiness? And shall I let all go,  
 Glad, weary, or both? Or shall I perhaps know  
 That I was happy oft and oft before,  
 Awhile forgetting how I am fast pent,  
 How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to,  
 Is Time? I cannot bite the day to the core.

Rising early and walking in the garden  
 Before the sun has properly climbed the hill--  
 His rays warming the roof, not yet the grass  
 That is white with dew still.

And not enough breeze to eddy a puff of smoke,  
 And out in the meadows a thick mist lying yet,  
 And nothing anywhere ill or noticeable--  
 Thanks indeed for that.

But was there ever a day with wit enough  
 To be always early, to draw the smoke up straight  
 Even at three o'clock of an afternoon,  
 To spare dullness or sweat?

Indeed, many such days I remember  
 That were dew-white and gracious to the last,  
 That ruled-out meal times, yet had no more hunger  
 Than was felt by rising a half-hour before breakfast,  
 Nor more fatigue--where was it that I went

So unencumbered, with my feet trampling  
Like strangers on the past? (CP 64)

Whereas in Thomas's poem the concrete details and references to the speaker's physical presence are partially subordinated to and partially mingled with the spiritual yearnings of the speaker, in Graves's poem, the physical details seem to co-exist with the ephemerality of human moods, without one outweighing or deeply affecting the other. Although both poets refer to physical hunger and weariness, in Thomas's poem these conditions are linked directly with a spiritual discomfort, and they seem to be used to give substance to the elusive moods of the poet, rather than as indicators of the physical sensations that happen to accompany these moods. Thomas concludes his poem with the admission of frustrated desire: "I cannot bite the day to the core." Graves's expression of discontent is much less passionate and soul-searching, yet the physical sensation described is more vivid his final stanza.

Despite the admittedly considerable differences in tone and subject matter of these two poems, the methods employed in both are essentially characteristic of each author. Although there can be difficulties tracking down similarities between certain poems within the broad spectrum of Graves's canon, a brief comparison of his work with that of a poet like Edward Thomas throws some pervasive Gravesian qualities into sharp relief. The unlabored and matter-of-fact physical presence of Graves's speakers becomes more

apparent when one views them beside the more outward-looking and inward-thinking personae of Thomas's poems. There is a sense in which Graves's speakers are somewhat edgy and need to get on with their lives; they display an impatience with minutely evanescent shiftings of thought and feeling, such as we find, for example, in Thomas's poems "Rain," "Ambition," and "Liberty." Graves rarely uses the winding and sequed syntax of Thomas:<sup>41</sup> Graves's poems most often enact an abrupt shift in mood, time, or logical progression, which curtails any extended consideration of the kind accommodated by the fluid sentences of Thomas. Graves struggles to maintain solid control of his thoughts and feelings, so much so that even when he apparently submits to a passionate impulse or daydreamy state, one senses that there is a conscious permissiveness in his attitude, as opposed to anything approaching domination by the passionate feeling. This blending of self-discipline and emotional

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<sup>41</sup>Consider the gracefully meditative progress of the final lines of "Rain":

But here I pray that none whom once I loved  
 Is dying tonight or lying still awake  
 Solitary, listening to the rain,  
 Either in pain or thus in sympathy  
 Helpless among the living and the dead,  
 Like a cold water among reeds,  
 Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,  
 Like me who have no love which this wild rain  
 Has not dissolved except the love of death,  
 If love it be for what is perfect and  
 Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

indulgence contributes to the stubborn desire expressed in "Prometheus," where the speaker asserts that he is "in love as giants are/ That dote upon the evening star," yet implores the vulture that is emblematic of jealousy to "feed" and "not fly away--/ If she who fetched you also stay" (CP 173).

There is a boldness in the demeanor of many of the speakers in Graves's poems which is sometimes irascible, as in "Front Door Soliliquy": "You hog-rat whiskered, you psalm-griddling,/ Lame, rotten-livered, which and what canaille" (CP 61). At other times, though ever aware of encroaching doubts and uncertainties, Graves uses a bluff manner which indicates a knowledge that some action is ultimately called for, as in poems like "Time"--"And will I not pretend the accustomed thanks?" (CP 81)--and "Despite and Still"--"Never let us deny/ The thing's necessity" (CP 127). This control of themselves and their circumstances that Graves's personae most often crave may also partly account for the vigorous muscularity of many of his poems. Whereas Thomas's less grasping search for self-knowledge leads him to more abstract and perhaps more tentative conclusions--"How dreary-swift is time, with naught to travel to"<sup>42</sup>;"imperfect friends, we men/ And trees since time began; and nevertheless/ Between us still we breed a

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<sup>42</sup>Thomas, 218

mystery"<sup>43</sup>--Graves's search is much more like an interrogation which insists that some knowledge must be discovered from which one can act accordingly, if even in partial ignorance: "Then we at last bethought ourselves, made shift,/ And simultaneously this final gift/ Gave" (CP 48); "He continues quick and dull in his clear images,/ I continue slow and sharp in my broken images" (CP 62); "Love may be blind, but Love at least,/ Knows what is man and what mere beast" (CP 78). If this refusal to brood upon matters over which the individual has no control deprives Graves of the kind of lingeringly beautiful passages we find in Thomas's "The Glory" ("And tread the pale dust pitted with small dark drops")<sup>44</sup>, or "Rain" ("listening to the rain .... / Helpless among the living and the dead,/ Like a cold water among broken reeds,/ Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff"),<sup>45</sup> one should remember that it is probably this selfsame restraint which enables Graves to challenge the rankling indecision and mouldering conjecture which so often inhibits meaningful and mature action. This restraint is marvellously expressed in the lines from "The Shot": "O weary luxury of hypothesis--/ For human nature, honest human nature/ (Which the fear-pampered heart denies)/ Knows its own miracle: not to go mad" (CP 122) as well as those from

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<sup>43</sup>Thomas, 220.

<sup>44</sup>Thomas, 217.

<sup>45</sup>Thomas, 237.

"To Sleep": "Now that I recall/ All scattered elements of  
will that swooped,...as dawn birds flew wildly at the panes/  
In curiosity rattling out their brains" (CP 126).

Sensitively subtle contemplation is certainly not in essence hostile to decisive action, and it might be argued that certain types of goal-oriented contemplation are desperately needed prerequisites for all of our important undertakings; yet Graves is continually on the look-out for the modes of rationalization and emotionalism which deflect, or needlessly and fearfully postpone significant action. The speakers and subjects of Graves's best poems are notably dynamic: this dynamism is generated by the bracing enactment of ideas which are embodied by depictions of fallible humans who display both admirable and despicable propensities. "The Bards" is a fine example of this energetic embodiment of ideas; the bards themselves are rendered in their full ragged valour and pitiable social unacceptability:

    Their cheeks are blotched for shame, their running  
        verse  
Stumbles, which marrow-bones the drunken diners  
Pelt them for their delay.  
It is a something fearful in the song  
Plagues them--an unknown grief that like a churl  
Goes commonplace in cowskin  
And bursts unheralded, crowing and coughing,  
An unpilled holly-club in his hand,  
Into their many-shielded, samite-curtained,  
Jewel-bright hall where twelve kings sit at chess  
Over the white-bronze pieces and the gold;  
And by a gross enchantment  
Flails down the rafters and leads off the queens--  
The wild-swan-breasted, the rose-ruddy-cheeked  
Raven-haired daughters of their admiration--



To stir his black pots and to bed on straw.<sup>46</sup>

With the exception of "a something fearful in the song" and "an unknown grief," the poem consists entirely of concrete details and descriptions of muscular movements, the energy of which is emphasized by the adept placement of the verbs "Stumbles," "Pelts," "Plagues," and "Flails" at the beginnings of their lines. In following the lively movements of the bards and their churl-like grief, we may be captivated by the same "gross enchantment" which wins over the "Raven-haired daughters." Although there seems to be an implicit commendation of the bards, I suspect that it would be a misreading of the poem to view its final line--as several commentators, including Hoffman and Day, have argued--as indicative of an indisputable triumph for the bards in spite of the "unknown grief."

My suspicion concerning the final line of "The Bards" is entangled with a fascinating, yet frustratingly complex piece of external evidence in the form of a three-page manuscript (circa 1932) which contains Graves's brief prose explanations of his volume Poems 1930-33. (It is in the holdings of the State University of New York at Buffalo poetry archives.) This curious assemblage of terse and sometimes gnomic statements about selected poems in the 1933 volume is interesting for several reasons, not the least of which is that it presents the poems in this volume as

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<sup>46</sup>Robert Graves, Poems 1930-33 (London: Heinemann, 1933) 1.

forming a sequence, an intention which one is very unlikely to imagine when reading the volume as it stands. However, the individuality of particular poems in the volume weakens, and, in a sense, trivializes the unifying theory of emotional and physical self-discipline which Graves apparently at one point hoped would animate and synthesize the specific parts into a larger oeuvre. In order to convey the uncharacteristic prescriptive and methodical tone of this document, I will quote the introductory section entitled "Man Ending," and the prose gloss of "The Bards":

Explanation: The natural man is aware of an order beyond nature to which he must finally submit by voluntary death. This order is to be understood through woman, not the historical woman of his own creation, but woman in her own right. By wilfull stupidity he postpones this understanding and dies with unnecessary drama and pain.

The Bards: As a poet he has always been troubled by the grossness of the fate--his own unrealized brutality with which his most delicate and luxurious fancies are cursed.<sup>47</sup>

The troubled nature of the bards is certainly mentioned in the poem itself--"an unknown grief"--yet the "unrealized" nature of what the gloss refers to as their "brutality" is not clear. The belief that the poet's power is that of a "gross enchantment" can be seen as a truly "cursed" state only if one first downplays the fact that the churl has, after all, led off the "wild-swan-breasted" queens, and then

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<sup>47</sup>Contained in the Robert Graves collection of manuscripts held at the State University of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.

gives special emphasis to the grossly reduced material circumstances to which the queens have been brought. Every commentary that I have read on this poem deals with the affirmative primal supremacy of the bards. Douglas Day goes so far as to refer to the poem as embodying Graves's sanguinary view of the bards,<sup>48</sup> while Daniel Hoffman's lengthy discussion of the poem explores intriguing possible source material for the poem in the Irish legend "The Pursuit of Gilla Dacker," "a farcical yarn of an ugly giant who carries away sixteen Fenian warriors," and "The Dream of Rhonabwy" from the Mabinogian. Yet even Hoffman's more thorough analysis leads him to conclude that the "burden" of the poem is the "magical authority of poetry."<sup>49</sup>

While there is an ambiguousness about the end of the poem, I don't believe that one must rely on Graves's ex post facto "explanation" to argue that the bards are not simply to be venerated for their seductive command of language. Taken in isolation, the line "To stir his black pots and to bed on straw" does not reverberate with anything like the rustic glamour of the country hideaway in Lady Chatterley's Lover. Nor is Graves, despite his tendencies to celebrate masculine gallantry, someone who ignores the woman's perspective in a love relationship. In "Theseus and

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<sup>48</sup>Day, 143.

<sup>49</sup>Daniel Hoffman, Barbarous Knowledge (London: Oxford UP, 1970) 168.

Ariadne" (CP 115), for example, Theseus imagines Ariadne haunting "the ruins of the ravaged lawns" while in actuality she is shown to call "a living blessing down upon/ What he supposes rubble and rank grass"; all his petty bitterness in recollecting their lost love is juxtaposed with Ariadne's generous forgiveness. The only way that I can imagine the critics who view the bards as fully triumphant managing to account for the final line of the poem is to see the drab setting as anchored in unpretentious necessity, in opposition to the ornamented opulence of the regal hall. Nevertheless, it appears that the "black pots" and "straw" bed can be viewed in a truly positive fashion only through a deliberate refusal to admit to the desirable nature of the dignified splendor of the "many-shielded, samite-curtained/ Jewel-bright hall."

The prose explanations offered for other poems in Poems 1930-33 are not generally as illuminating as the one concerning "The Bards." In fact, the majority of them are either simplistic and almost beside the point, as in the description of the argument followed in "The Succubus" ("Nor does woman accommodate herself to his impossible demands: she becomes a parody of his own lust"); or else they introduce a level of meaning which would not ordinarily surface in anything that resembles a literal understanding of the poem, as we discover in Graves's explanation of "On Dwelling": "he loses familiar contact with his former

selves." In a curious fashion, the comment about "On Dwelling" does provide a plausible way of interpreting an obscure poem with an especially impenetrable second stanza:

Here too I walk, silent myself, in wonder  
At a town not mine though plainly coextensive  
With mine, even in days coincident:  
In mine I dwell, in theirs like them I haunt. (CP 82)

Without Graves's gloss, the poem is like an especially challenging crossword puzzle: one can perhaps find an interpretation that fits, as the letters may fit the number of spaces in a puzzle, but one is never sure that one has the "correct" answer until the deviser of the puzzle provides it himself. D. N. G. Carter, for instance, sees the poem as a commentary upon "metropolitan solipsism,"<sup>50</sup> which is entirely plausible, but if we trust Graves's gloss, it is not what he had in mind. In a case like this, I think it is fair to say that the poem is enigmatic, and does not significantly advance the understanding of one's own "contact with [one's] former selves."<sup>51</sup>

What these explanations do manage to contribute to one's understanding of the poems in the 1933 collection is that the speaker of these poems is passionately concerned with learning how to live as fully as possible. He demands that his actions be conditioned by what he knows not only

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<sup>50</sup>Carter, 186

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For a more witty poem on this topic, see "Meeting My Former Self," by Graves's friend and poetic disciple, Norman Cameron.

through his senses, but also by virtue of his human consciousness which sets him apart from the order which he perceives in the cycles of nature. The "explanations" reveal that the poems represent a concerted effort to strengthen one's will against the "natural" pitfalls which reduce man to his animal stature, a lamentable condition viewed to be devoid of serious personal values and any apparent consciousness of purpose. The most ambitious declaration of this desire occurs in the short poem "The Fello'ed Year":

The pleasure of summer was its calm success  
 Over winter past and winter sequent:  
 The pleasure of winter was a warm counting,  
 'Summer comes soon, when, surely.'  
 This pleasure and that pleasure touched  
 In a perpetual spring with autumn ache,  
 A creak and groan of season,  
 In which all moved,  
 In which all move yet--I the same, yet praying  
 That the twelve spokes of this round-fello'ed year  
 Be a fixed compass, not a turning wheel.

(Poems 1930-33 28)

This earnest prayer to an unidentified, and, in fact, unmentioned numinous presence is uncharacteristic of the sceptical Graves we encounter in most of this volume. The gentleness with which the weariness and expectation are expressed conveys the humble uncertainty of his achingly desired purposefulness. The poem takes into consideration the painful effort required to resist the state of protracted expectation generated by the recurrent seasonal cycles. Although the prose explanation--"He observes the end of time"--is gnomically devoid of any emotional

resonances, it reveals that Graves sees a need to establish a sense of human ends and fixed purposes which is necessarily separate from an attempt to identify with the indifferently repetitive "creak and groan of season[s]."

The most recalcitrant complications that Graves struggles with in Poems 1930-33 are related to what he refers to in "Pygmalion to Galatea," from Poems 1914-26, as the "bonds of sullen flesh."<sup>52</sup> Michael Kirkham cites this phrase several times in his study of Graves's poetry, usually to show how the phrase, spoken by Galatea, clearly exemplifies Graves's belief that it is only through men's spiritual and emotional submission to the wisdom of women that they can hope to move beyond enslavement to brutish physical appetites. I would like to build upon the ways in which this attitude of sullenness towards the "flesh," particularly in the 1933 volume, is sometimes developed without any explicit references to the saving grace of female wisdom, so that the struggle with the uncomplying ways of the body is given a more wide-ranging human significance. While poems like "Down, Wanton, Down!" and, more explicitly, "To Whom Else" are plainly reliant upon the presumption of female moral and spiritual authority, poems such as "The Legs," "Trudge, Body" "Ulysses," and "The Foolish Senses" rely upon a variety of perspectives to

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<sup>52</sup>Robert Graves, Poems 1914-26 (London: Heinemann, 1927) 203.

approach the entanglements of living with but not solely in the mind-less confines of the body.

The weakest of the four poems just mentioned is "The Foolish Senses": the poem offers a simplistic diagnosis-- "Your outward staring that is inward blind"--and proposes a frustratingly inexplicit and unconstructive remedy in a bland decree-like tone--"Let them [the foolish senses] cease now" (Poems 1930-33 25). More successful is the hearty commanding tone of "Trudge, Body," where the speaker acknowledges the body's slacknesses and its tendencies to complacency. The speaker refuses to succumb to the body's passivity:

Trudge, body, and climb, trudge and climb,  
But not to stand again on any peak of time.  
Trudge, body.

I'll cool you, body, with a hot sun, that draws the  
sweat,  
I'll warm you, body, with ice water, that stings the  
blood,  
I'll enrage you, body, with idleness, to do  
And having done to sleep the long night through:  
Trudge, body.

The brusque, demanding tone is appealing and well-realized; although one cannot help but think that such a procedure as is described in the poem could only be temporary. The summary in his prose explanation which recommends "a policy of continuously postponing [the body's] gratifications," shows Graves setting a pace for himself which would be unsustainable by the most sado-masochistic of aerobics instructors. Nevertheless, a high level of vigilance is



required in any form of self-mastery, and the recurrent inability to maintain that ideal level need not expose the uselessness of the ideal, but rather indicates the need for the continual renewal of one's efforts.

Graves's frequent paring-down of themes in his poems opens up the question of whether he is miscalling simplicity simple truth, to invert a phrase from Shakespeare's Sonnet Sixty-six. For example, is the need to hold sway over one's body in such fiercely determined fashion in "Trudge, Body" a "simple truth" that is deftly reinforced by the staunch wit and vigor of the poem? Or is the poem so narrowed in scope that it ignores contingent truths that, if they were given due consideration, would expose the puerile "simplicity" of the strict regimen suggested in the poem? The latter view is an extrapolation of the kind of criticism levelled by Charles Tomlinson, who asserts that "The constriction and attendant simplification result in a willed curtailment of Graves's powers, a splintering away of the vision into a series of brief lyric statements."<sup>53</sup>

Once again, the way in which something is known in many of Graves's poems is extremely important in establishing a solid grasp of what is to be known: the brevity of Graves's best poems, their "willed curtailment," is itself an essential condition of their impact. Tomlinson's

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<sup>53</sup>Charles Tomlinson, "Poetry Today" in The Pelican Guide to English Literature, ed. Boris Ford, 2nd ed. (Markham: Penguin, 1962) 465.

observation does capture the exclusive, narrowing concentration apparent in some of Graves's poems, but certain kinds of curtailment are found in the best as well as the worst lyric poetry. Graves is aware of the point at which certain types of meditative thinking ought to be curtailed if one has any intention of acting upon what one thinks one knows. The connection between the idea of a poem functioning as a medium of cognitive exploration and the idea that the poem presents knowledge which informs or appraises our deeds is a bond which is established by the prominence of the poet's will. The feeling that there is a whole person--as opposed to a mind reflecting upon its corporeal boundaries from time to time--speaking in Graves's poems seems to emerge at least in part from his presentation of the will as that which fuses thought and bodily action. This effect may be achieved amusingly, as in "Lift Boy," where "Old Eagle" "stopped at the fourth floor and preached me Damnation:/ Not a soul shall be saved, not one shall be saved/....So I cut the cords and down we went/ With nothing in our pockets" (CP 55) or with much more seriously treated moral implications, as in "Ulysses":

Flesh had one pleasure only in the act,  
 Flesh set one purpose only in the mind--  
 Triumph of flesh and afterwards to find  
 Still those same terrors wherewith the flesh was  
 racked.

(CP 56)

Beginning in the thirties, Graves becomes fascinated with the abilities and strangely-mingled motives which manifest

themselves in what are commonly called willed actions.

Poems 1930-33 is the first volume of Graves work which places a sizeable emphasis upon the necessity of consciously willed action and the lamentable consequences which result from ignoring or abdicating this responsibility. The almost monastic severity with which the body is treated in the poems of this volume is countered only by the wry skepticism which tinges the specious ideal of the assumed subjection of the body to the mind in poems such as "The Legs" and "The Cell" (retitled "The Philosopher"). The desire to act according to one's set purposes and not be trapped within a series of merely reactive modes of behaviour is a recurrent dilemma explored in these poems. The complexities inherrent in being both the "I" who initiates action--who wills it-- and the "I" who must accede to the demands of the controlling "I" are examined in several of the poems in this volume, as well as in other poems of the 'Thirties and 'Forties. Something of the vitality of "The Fello'd Year," "Time," "The Legs," and "Down, Wanton, Down!" is generated by Graves's developing realization of the internal power struggles of a single personality; these miniature power relationships are explored in a manner similar to that of Nietzsche's in Beyond Good and Evil:

What is called 'freedom of will' is essentially the emotion of superiority over him who must obey: 'I am free, "he" must obey'--this consciousness adheres to every will, as does that tense attention, that straight look which fixes itself exclusively on one thing, that unconditional

evaluation that 'this and nothing else is necessary now,' that inner certainty that one will be obeyed, and whatever else pertains to the state of him who gives commands.<sup>54</sup>

Graves repeatedly explores the "emotion of superiority" which "fixes itself exclusively on one thing," thereby eliminating whatever does not converge immediately upon his direct concern. Thus, Tomlinson is accurate in his contention that there is a "willed curtailment" in Graves's poetry, but this curtailment need not always indicate a "splintering away of the vision" in as drastic and damaging fashion as Tomlinson presumes. Admittedly, Graves very rarely develops a wide social context in his poems as do contemporaries like Louis MacNeice and Hugh MacDiarmid, nor does he expand upon aesthetic niceties as do Pound and Stevens. Yet as a consequence of these disinclinations, he seldom digresses in his poems, and instead presents us with the very pointed determination of speakers who, despite the quandry-generating sophistication of their minds, know that some decisive action must be taken. The demand for obedience is noticeable in the very phrasing of many of his poems: "Be off, elude the curse" (CP 44); "Children, leave the string alone!" (CP 30); "Be warm, enjoy the season, lift your head" (CP 49); "I am proud spirit/ And you for ever clay. Have done!" (CP 58); "Feed, jealousy, do not fly away" (CP 173).

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<sup>54</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Markham: Penguin, 1973) 30.

Two of the bossiest examples of Graves's strong-willed personae are found in "Thief" and "The Furious Voyage," both of which first appeared in Poems 1926-30 and were placed one after the other in Collected Poems 1975 so that they read almost as companion pieces. The first poem is like a raucous bellowing at that which is petty and parasitic in one's self and which must be kept in check, and the second parodies the overreaching and maniacal temperament which ignores the limits of the will-to-power:

To the galleys, thief, and sweat your soul out  
 With strong tugging under the curled whips,  
 That there your thievishness may find full play.  
 Whereas, before you stole rings, flowers and watches,  
 Oaths, jests and proverbs,  
 Yet paid for bed and board like an honest man,  
 This shall be entire thieftom: you shall steal  
 Sleep from chain-galling, diet from sour crusts,  
 Comradeship from the damned, the ten-year-chained--  
 And more, more than this, the excuse for life itself  
 From a craft steered toward battles not your own.  
(CP 53)

So, overmasterful, to sea!  
 But hope no distant view of sail,  
 Nor growling ice, nor weed, nor whale,  
 Nor breakers perilous on the lee.

Though you enlarge your angry mind  
 Three leagues and more about the ship  
 And stamp till every puncheon skip,  
 The wake runs evenly behind.

And it has width enough for you,  
 This vessel, dead from truck to keel,  
 With its unmanageable wheel,  
 A blank chart and a surly crew,

In ballast only due to fetch  
 The turning point of wretchedness  
 On an uncoasted, featureless  
 And barren ocean of blue stretch. (CP 53)

The metrical virtuosity displayed in both of these

poems deftly reinforces their opposing perspectives upon willfulness. In "Thief," the rhythm is that of a rather loose blank verse which is steadied by the essentially regular lines like "Yet paid for bed and board like an honest man" and "And, more than this, the excuse for life itself," the first of which relies upon a light anapest in the fourth foot. The numerous substitutions in lines like "With strong tugging under the curled whips," and "Sleep from chain-galling, diet from sour crusts," nearly overthrow the iambic rhythm of the poem, resisting the restraints of regularity just as the "thief" does; yet the reassertion of the iambic rhythm in the penultimate line makes more emphatic the word "steered" in the final line. Although there is considerable resistance, the will of he who steers the craft exerts the greater force.

"The Furious Voyage" depends upon a somewhat ironic relationship between the rhythm and the sense of the lines. The orderly and compact four stanzas, each consisting of four lines of iambic tetrameter, establish a resilient opposition to the overbearing and thrill-seeking willfulness of the ship-master. Even the brash five-syllable "overmasterful" of the opening line scarcely disrupts the iambic rhythm, the first syllable even losing some of its relative stress by following the heavy stress of the beginning word, "So." The second stanza is even more subtle in its ironic interplay of rhythm and sense. The

mostly regular line "Though you enlarge your angry mind" is followed by a spondee in the first position of the next line "Three leagues and more about the ship," thus momentarily emphasizing the vast breadth of the imaginative scope. And the ineffectuality of the ship-master is brilliantly supported by the rhythm of the following two lines where the violent action "And stamp till every puncheon skip" is unaccompanied by any corresponding "skip" in the metrical norm (unless perhaps one places a relatively stronger stress upon the unaccented syllable "till").

Graves reserves the most riveting rhythmical effect for the final stanza, where the accented syllable of the third foot in the second line is given added emphasis through rhyming with the final syllable of the preceding line: "In ballast only due to fetch/ The turning point of wretchedness." The heavy stress not only enhances the fetching of the vessel; it also draws attention to the "wretch" whose angry, domineering behaviour is at least partly responsible for the ship's desolation. "The Furious Voyage" trenchantly anatomizes the sterility and emptiness which almost inevitably attends the sort of wilfulness which is born of a virulent despotic desire to overcome adversity merely so as to assert one's own power. In order even to begin to know one's self, Graves feels, one must recognize the disproportionate perspectives that one can develop in attempting to compensate for one's own fear of inadequacy.

## v

Metaphors of proportion play a large role in many of Graves's poems: his investigation of the relationships between the will and the elastic imaginative powers of the mind brings the deceptiveness of putative self-knowledge to the fore. One has only to think of poems such as "Warning to Children," "Outlaws," "The Shot," "To Sleep," "Interruption," "Synthetic Such," "Ogres and Pygmies," "Sea Side," and "The Terraced Valley" to notice how he is frequently absorbed with how one's imaginative virtuosity can lead to intellectual distortion as often as to clarification, and, consequently, how one's will can become duped by these mental shrinkages and magnifications. He is aware that--whatever the complex human mechanism of motive and ambition which we call our will might be--any satisfactory concept of volition is rarely one which proposes a perfectly balanced synthesis: in his poetry, the will is often viewed as a lopsided composite of desire, inclination, compulsion, and determination. Contradictions abound when one tries to theorize about the nature of the will, yet Graves, rather than engaging in lengthy verse disputations on this matter, shows some of the ways in which one attempts to resolve a few of these contradictions in action. As we see in both "To Sleep" and "The Terraced Valley," to know another person in a love relationship is an



arduous process of unifying one's fragmentary and distorted imaginative projections so that one might eventually see the person as a discrete whole. For example, after the speaker of "To Sleep" recognizes that he was only "Loving in part" and that his efforts to "conjure" a "whole" vision of his beloved leave him behaving as a "vexed insomniac" who "dream-forges," he particularizes his dilemma in the final two stanzas:

Now that I love you, now that I recall  
 All scattered elements of will that swooped  
 By night as jealous dreams through windows  
 To circle above the bed like bats,  
 Or as dawn-birds flew blindly at the panes  
 In curiosity rattling out their brains--

Now that I love you, as not before,  
 Now you can be and say, as not before,  
 The mind clears and the heart true-mirrors you  
 Where at my side an early watch you keep  
 And all self-bruising heads loll into sleep. (CP 126)

The image of the "scattered elements of will" fluttering like bats is aptly frenetic. The desperate and self-inflicted violence of the dawn-birds also hints at the dangers involved in misdirected and disjointed curiosity. However, as intriguingly rendered as these "scattered elements of will" may be, one might wish that the "whole" man who "now" loves the woman would be a little less certain that he now miraculously allows the woman to "be and say, as not before." If the newly-gained clarity were not presented as being so absolute and seemingly permanent in the final stanza--as the line "The heart true-mirrors you" suggests--and shown rather as an ideal to which the poet aspires, we

might not feel any uneasiness in accepting that, for unspecified reasons, now he does love her "wholly." Whether or not Graves senses that this transition to true-mirroring the beloved is a deep inner change which could not be adequately rendered in words, it may be that too much of the poem's impact relies upon the reader's blind faith that the poet is now "whole." In this poem, Graves's usually admirable temerity amounts to a kind of self-deception, perhaps of a potentially more dangerous sort than he started with, namely, the kind which persuades the poet that finally he sees the woman as she truly and completely is, thus possibly permitting him to ignore any future changes in his beloved. Yet, even so, the focus of the final stanza implies that loving is not so much a case of the unification of the "scattered elements of will" as it is a matter of this wilfulness being made subservient to the heart's desire.

A similar difficulty confronts the reader of "The Terraced Valley."<sup>55</sup> The sensation of moving from the vacuum-like mind-scape of the first three stanzas where "The unnecessary sky was not there/ Therefore no heights, no deeps, no birds of the air" to the final stanza where the beloved's voice "broke/ This trick of time" has been described by Michael Kirkham as "too brisk and neat. It has the effect of devaluing the poem's experience, which is made

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<sup>55</sup>This poem is quoted in full in Chapter Four.

to carry for that moment no more weight of significance than a bad dream."<sup>56</sup> The wilful concentration of the poet leads him to envision an ideal zone, a "new region," devoid of contradictions:

Neat outside-inside, neat below-above,  
Hermaphrodizing love.  
Neat this-way-that-way and without mistake:  
On the right hand could slide the left glove. (CP 107)

This willed artificial neatness quickly proves itself to be a seclusive ordering of reality in the speaker's mind, and it is unaccommodating to the presence even of the woman who apparently was initially the inspiration for this bizzare conception of a "counter earth." Once again, Graves rejects knowledge which has the effect of distancing one from life as it is lived in the body. Yet the saving presence of the woman's voice which dispels the illusory knowledge of an inviolate perfection is not a presence which is developed in any manner or length comparable to that of the strangely beguiling imaginative region. As in "To Sleep," the problem is interestingly presented, but the solution is not as persuasive as one would hope.

Yet even when love doesn't inspire an elaborate or idiosyncratic vision of possible perfection, the opposing tendency to distort a situation by relying upon conventional ideas is also questioned in his poems. Graves can be disarmingly frank about the ways in which we wilfully

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<sup>56</sup>Kirkham, 109.

attempt to attach cliched romantic notions to situations which are beyond our control, as in "Never Such Love" ("For words of rapture groping, they/ 'Never such love' swore, 'ever before was!'/ Contrast with all loves that had failed or staled/ Registered their own as love indeed" CP 89), and "At First Sight":

'Love at first sight,' some say, misnaming  
Discovery of twinned helplessness  
Against the huge tug of procreation. (CP 77)

The brilliance of the phrase "the huge tug of procreation" lies partly in its witty connotativeness. We do not usually think of a tug in terms of its size, and when we are faced with this clever combination of words it is difficult to decide which comes first to mind--the tug of a shirt-sleeve or a tug-o'-war. Both are relevant to procreation: the playfulness and intimacy which involves tugging between the lovers are as significant as the large-forearmed and sturdy-backed heave-ho of the instinct to continue the species. At any rate, the notion of a "tug" certainly deflates the conventional romantic unpredictability implied in the cliché which opens the poem.

Graves quite often uses metaphors of proportion in exploring how we attempt to affect control over circumstances which are beyond our influence. This is evidenced in phrases like "Though you enlarge your angry mind" (CP 53); "Reading between such covers he will marvel/ How his own members bloat and shrink again" (CP 83); "No hot

drink in his mouth,/ But a mind dream-enlarged" (CP 93);  
 "The pupils of the eyes expand/ And from near-nothings build  
 up sight" (CP 100); "Interruption looms gigantified" (CP  
 73); and in the startling miniaturizing, and thus  
 trivializing, recollection of the ageing veterans in the  
 final stanza of "Recalling War":

And we recall the merry ways of guns--  
 Nibbling the walls of factory and church  
 Like a child, piecrust; felling groves of trees  
 Like a child, dandelions with a switch.  
 Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill,  
 Down in a row the brave tin-soldiers fall:  
 A sight to be recalled in elder days  
 When learnedly the future we devote  
 To yet more boastful visions of despair. (CP 1938 129)

The attempt to cut things down to size which is  
 observable in so many of Graves's poems is a delicate  
 process because it involves not only the admirable rejection  
 of irrelevancies and exaggerations but can also result in  
 oversimplification. Although "Recalling War" is perhaps  
 Graves's most ambitious "social" poem (as opposed to his  
 characteristically "personal lyrics"), he chose to exclude  
 it from his later volumes of collected poems. We do not  
 know why he omitted the poem from later collections, but it  
 would be in keeping with his reluctance to make statements  
 which could not be verified by personal experience. He may  
 have found lines like "War was return of earth to ugly  
 earth;/ War was foundering of sublimities" (CP 1938 129) to  
 be infected with the rhetoric of a public-spirited orator  
 whose impressive-sounding generalizations reduce complex,

heterogeneous regrets into a pseudo-universal statement. Graves feels that he can write with justifiable authority mainly when he concentrates upon the modulations that the individual will must undergo in the various trade-offs, withholdings, compromises, submissions, and the rare mutual exchanges which are occasioned by the ever-adjusting stages of love-relationships.

The successes in Graves's single-minded efforts to know "with labor and most amply" are especially curious ones because most of them depend as much upon aggressive, relentless searching as they do upon passive attentiveness. Knowing, for Graves, is neither exclusively an affair of the mind which endlessly shifts its focus in its attempts at provisional clarity, nor is it predominantly an affair of the heart which gives and receives messages with unquestionable strength but with scant impartiality or prudence. The division of the self into the conflicts between the head and heart is given a rejuvenating power in Graves's best poems which has not been so masterfully managed since the likes of Donne's "Filled with her love, may I be rather grown/ Mad with much heart, than idiot with none"<sup>57</sup> or Fulke Greville's "What meaneth nature by these diverse laws?/ Passion and reason self-division cause."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>John Donne, "The Dream," The Complete English Poems, ed. A. J. Smith (Markham: Penguin, 1971) 107.

<sup>58</sup>Fulke Greville, Selected Writings of Fulke Greville, ed. Joan Rees (London: Althone Press, 1973) 138.

The turbulent wrangling of passion and reason is nowhere treated with more urbane energy in Graves's poetry than in "Sick Love." As was suggested earlier in this chapter, there is a tendency to ignore the affirmative verbal cues in the poem, which are strengthened by the sober recognition that they are necessary affirmations which must be made in spite of the "outer blackness," the "tainted blood," and the absence of "peace." Even in his extensive and perceptive analysis of the poem, D. N. G. Carter argues that the phrase "be fed with" is a "use of the passive voice [which] at once precludes a jovial predatoriness" (a quality which Carter does see in an earlier Carpe Diem poem, Herrick's "Gather Ye Rosebuds").<sup>59</sup> Yet if one examines the other verbs in the poem, one sees that it is much more likely that the optative mood--expressive of a wishful prompting--prevails, as the verbs in the line "Be warm, enjoy the season, lift your head" most certainly indicate. The mind encourages circumspection, but even its considerations are given emphasis by some of the same emotional energy which it would suppress, as exemplified in the phrase, "the paranoiac fury." Graves achieves a precarious fusion of intellect and emotion that is so vividly realized that one can barely decide if this poem is better described as embodying intellect charged with emotion or emotion charged with intellect. His astounding mixture

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<sup>59</sup>Carter, 94.

of auditory, visual, spatial and tactile imagery in the poem renders the process of poetic knowing with an arresting thoroughness. The fullness of knowing in the body and mind, as well as within the context of time and space, is conveyed with shimmering expertise in the final stanza:

Take your delight in momentariness,  
Walk between dark and dark--a shining space  
With the grave's narrowness, though not its peace.  
(CP 49)

This stanza artfully shifts from the consideration of time ("momentariness") to a spatial image which also alerts us to bodily movement ("Walk between dark and dark"), which nonetheless also has definite connotations of duration. "[B]etween dark and dark," for example, may imply daytime, when one can "feel the sun," as well as the more oblique connotation of being between the darkneses preceding birth and following death. What lies between these darkneses is unequivocally bright ("a shining space") but of a somewhat indeterminate size--a "space"--a word which is seen to be especially appropriate when one considers how much the line would lose were the unresonant rhyme word "place" used instead.

Graves skilfully veers between abstractions, exhortations and concrete images, using the techniques of surrealism so sparingly that one is not jarred by an overly self-conscious artifice. (Carter has noted in passing the



"surrealistic clarity"<sup>60</sup> of "Sick Love" and the final stanza of "Pure Death," but he does not pursue this observation.) The stark juxtaposition of the "shining space" and the "dark and dark" produces something close to the disconcerting effect of some of Rene Magritte's paintings, particularly the one in which a night-lit house is superimposed upon a bright blue-skied day. As is often the case in Graves's poems, the moment of deep knowing is invariably reinforced or accompanied by a type of surprise, shock, or bewilderment. The difference between Graves's use of surrealistic imagery and that of a poet like Dylan Thomas is that Graves never abandons lucid syntactical arrangements in order to achieve a disquieting effect. Compare the ominous, yet vivid image of the unlocking of the "sinister, long, brass-bound coffin-box" to "unwrap pure death" with the impenetrably odd, yet equally creepy opening stanza of this Thomas poem:

When, like a running grave, time tracks you down,  
Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs,  
Love in her gear is slowly through the house,  
Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse,  
Hauled to the dome<sup>61</sup>

Graves implies, both in his poetry and in several of his non-fictional prose writings (such as A Survey of Modernist Poetry and The Crowning Privilege), that one may

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<sup>60</sup>Carter, 96.

<sup>61</sup>Dylan Thomas, The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas (London: J. M. Dent, 1952) 16.

know certain things that one finds nearly impossible to render in the relatively unrhythmical medium of prose. Yet his faith in the suppleness with which knowledge may be conveyed in the more variable cadences and syntax of poetry never provokes him to engage in radically experimental techniques, as it does with poets like William Carlos Williams, Stéphane Mallarmé, Charles Olson, Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas. He recognizes that certain efforts to escape deadeningly conventional and habitual ways of viewing the world are essential to the making of memorable poems, but he sees no need to subvert syntax in order to take advantage of the pliancy of verse.

Graves's sparing use of surrealism provides another explanation for the contemporary feel of his poetry despite his eschewal of modernist strategies. Together with his suave intermingling of fairly straightforward syntax and diction with more "literary" and elaborate turns of phrase, this mild surrealism gives his poetry a radiant appeal that, while rarely dispensing with traditional meters and stanza forms, places it well beyond the Edwardian gloominess of Housman and the Imperialist perkiness of Kipling.

Graves's use of surrealistic and dream-like images in poems which attempt to explore supernatural intimations is interesting in itself. (e.g., "futurity becomes a womb and the unborn are shed," "On Portents" CP 107; "the undying snake from chaos hatched,/ Whose coils contain the ocean,"

"To Juan at the Winter Solstice" CP 138). However, his use of them is most effective when it is applied to the disconcerting and elusive emotional nuances associated with relatively tangible human experiences, especially the moods of lovers, as explored in "Pure Death," "Sick Love," "Counting the Beats," and "Full Moom" ("They glared as marble statues glare/ Across the tessellated stair" CP 46). In each of these poems the surrealistic elements contribute to the sense of dread or fear, the most pervasive and powerful emotions which so often accompany what Graves perceives as moments of real knowing.

In "Counting the Beats" (CP 165), for example, the magnificent frisson of the poem is triggered by the surreal association of the mortal running-out of time with the throbbing movement of blood in one's heart--"The bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats." The grim knowledge of death for the lovers depicted in the poem is neither pushed aside nor intellectually distanced into a remote time. The tenderly insouciant tone of the opening stanza where the male speaker whispers, "And if no more than only you and I/ What care you or I?" is trenchantly undercut by the third-person refrain of the second stanza:

Counting the beats,  
 Counting the slow heart beats,  
 The bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats,  
 Wakeful they lie.

The sparseness of imagery in the remainder of the poem accentuates the starkness of the lovers' awareness, and it

demonstrates that no external comforts or diversions can assuage the fear of the woman:

Cloudless day,  
Night, and a cloudless day,  
Yet the huge storm will burst upon their heads one day  
From a bitter sky.

Where shall we be,  
(She whispers) where shall we be  
When death strikes home, O where then shall we be  
Who were you and I?

Not there but here,  
(He whispers) only here,  
As we are, here, together, now and here,  
Always you and I.

The wakefulness of the woman seems to be a sign of her unmitigated terror of death; yet it also may signify her passionate attentiveness to the present moment.

Rhythmically, the poem is rather unusual. The first line of each stanza consists of four syllables, with the exception of stanza three which has only three; the second lines are all of six syllables with the exception of stanza four, in which there are seven; the third lines are all pentameter except for stanza three in which there is a hexameter; and the fourth lines are all of five syllables except for the final line of the refrain, "Wakeful they lie." The meter is essentially iambic, but there are many substitutions (although occurring predominantly in the easily inverted first foot). The overall effect of the meter is one of hesitancy, which is reinforced by the numerous commas as well as the repetitions of words at the ends of lines where one might expect a "normal" rhyme scheme. The rhythm of the

pentameter line in the refrain is quite successful: "The bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats"--the anapest in the second foot intimates the quickness of death's approach despite the lagging, painful apprehensiveness caused by listening to the "slow heart beats."

As always in Graves's most distinguished poems, the type of knowing conveyed is of the kind which is aware of the corporeal nature of even man's most treasured experiences. The inseparability of the knowledge of love from one's knowledge of death's inevitable destruction of it is rendered with a passion which brings to mind the barely controlled inclusiveness of the Renaissance poet Michael Drayton's line "He only lives that deadly is in love."<sup>62</sup> The besetting impact of this belief is nowhere more exquisitely developed in Graves's work than in "Pure Death":

We looked, we loved, and therewith instantly  
 Death became terrible to you and me.  
 By love we disenthralled our natural terror  
 From every comfortable philosopher  
 Or tall, grey doctor of divinity:  
 Death stood at last in his true rank and order.

It happened soon, so wild of heart were we,  
 Exchange of gifts grew to a malady:  
 Their worth rose always higher on each side  
 Till there seemed nothing but ungivable pride  
 That yet remained ungiven, and this degree  
 Called a conclusion not to be denied.

Then we at last bethought ourselves, made shift  
 And simultaneously this final gift  
 Gave: each with shaking hands unlocks  
 The sinister, long, brass-bound coffin-box,

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<sup>62</sup>Michael Drayton, "So Well I Love Thee" in English Renaissance Poetry, ed. John Williams (New York: Anchor, 1963) 225.

Unwraps pure death, with such bewilderment  
 As greeted our love's first acknowledgement. (CP 48)

As romantic and precipitous as the opening words "We looked, we loved" may be, the excessiveness in this formulation is checked by the logical inevitability implied by "therewith," a term which moderates the impulsiveness suggested by "instantly." Although there may be room for disagreement, I read the opening admission as a poetic compression of the process of falling in love, rather than as a boastful depiction of any sort of love at first sight.<sup>63</sup> These first two lines suggest the profound truth that the thought of death only becomes truly terrible to certain people when they fall in love and are no longer comforted by the thought that death will put an end to their lonely existence. Now they fear to lose both their own reinvigorated life and that of their beloved. The remainder of the stanza shows how this animating power of love breaks the almost hypnotic enthrallment of one's normal fear of death which can be at times belittled by philosophy and theology.

A great deal of psychological and emotional stamina is

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<sup>63</sup>In one of the manuscript versions of the poem, we see that Graves at one point considered "We met, we loved"; the abandonment of this choice could indicate his reluctance to imply the notion of any sort of fleeting infatuation or one-night-stand, and yet there is also the more banal possibility that "looked" is the better choice in terms of the consonantal pattern of the line: "We looked, we loved, and therewith instantly."

necessary in order to sustain the shock caused by this liberation of one's "natural terror." The second stanza displays how this desperate knowledge manifests itself in efforts to prove the extent of one's love by feverishly heaping gift upon gift. The dizzying acceleration of the lovers' needs to prove the permanence of their love in a tangible fashion--"their worth rose always higher on each side"--is evinced with such graceful compression of thought, action, and feeling that one is willing to accept the potentially boastful, and inflatedly romantic phrase, "so wild of heart were we." That the "exchange of gifts" is no solution is conveyed both by the ever-increasing material value of the gifts, and by the recognition that there is perhaps more pride than mutual love involved in these actions.

This appraisal of the paltry competitiveness that develops between even the "wild of heart" as a result of the "ungivable" nature of pride is not presented as a justification for any defeatism:<sup>64</sup> "and this degree/ Called

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<sup>64</sup>Graves doesn't opt for anything like the plausible if somewhat facetious resignation portrayed in Larkin's "Love":

The difficult part of love  
Is being selfish enough,  
Is having the blind persistence  
To upset an existence  
Just for your own sake.  
What cheek it must take.

And then the unselfish side--  
How can you be satisfied,  
Putting someone else first,

a conclusion not to be denied." In the final stanza, the poem literally and metaphorically "shifts" from the plausible, if romantic generalizations and descriptions of the previous stanzas to the menacing and surreal depiction of the lovers exchanging their "long, brass-bound coffin-box[es]." After the initial word, "Gave," of line thirteen, the last four lines of this stanza also shift to the present tense, thus separating themselves in time from the past tense used in the two previous stanzas. The dilemma is outlined in the first two thirds of the poem, and, although the movement of the first two stanzas is hardly dull or enervated, the immediacy of the events relayed is slightly muffled by describing them in the past tense. The "natural terror" which was "disenthralled" in the first stanza is, even more strikingly, disinterred in the final stanza. The "pure death" which is uncovered is something of an unadulterated dread, unprotected by specious rationalization or any faith in bodily transcendence; yet it inspires feelings of mysteriousness and rapt engagement, as implied by the "bewilderment" which accompanies the unlocking and unwrapping. The French rhyme of the final syllables in the last two lines adds to the feeling of surprise at the end of the poem; and the shift to a three-couplet stanza from the aabbcb rhyme scheme of the two previous stanzas reinforces

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So that you come off worst?  
 My life is for me.  
 As well ignore gravity.

(Collected Poems 150)



the sense of renewed mutuality between the lovers. Although we are finally reminded of their "love's first acknowledgement," the argument of the poem is not merely circular. There is a return to the intensity of their first recognition of their love, but now there is a starkly mature acceptance of love's mortal limitations which greets the incomprehensibility of death with a proper sense of awe-- simultaneously joyous and terrible.

The kind of knowing which Graves most values is one in which he apprehends the allure of the "comfortable" philosophies, yet nevertheless mistrusts the putative detachment of such types of knowing, since they may overshrewdly dismiss the often intellectually evasive influence of fundamental emotional states such as "bewilderment" and "terror." I suspect that it is in accordance with such prudent--but not cowardly--hesitation, that Graves changed the final word of "Pure Death" from "accomplishment" in the Collected Poems 1938 version to "acknowledgement" in the Collected Poems 1947 version. There is a refined finality, an exaggerated sense of triumph and completion, implied in the idea of the "accomplishment" of love; this sense of accomplishment is irreconcilable with the precariousness of a passionate love which is signalled by the lovers' wildness of heart. Despite Michael Kirkham's interesting point that Graves's use of words such as "malady" and "accomplishment" reveals his sensitivity to the "past semantic histories" and

the medieval-romance associations of such terms,<sup>65</sup> the notion of a mutual recognition and an avowal of love--as implied by "acknowledgement"--accords better with the humbly exultant thrust of the poem. Thus, the "looking" of the first line takes on a sense of attentiveness far beyond ordinary visual delight for the lovers.

As I suggested earlier, the dynamic presentation of the competing demands of will, intellect, and emotion in so many of Graves's best poems subverts one's attempts to bring the more systematic terms of epistemology to bear upon his work. The activity of the mind--especially the mind as it is both provoked and restrained by the body--with all of its imprecisions, false starts, sudden insights, moral reservations, oneiric diversions, and involuntary impulses is portrayed as seeking new ways of knowing, as opposed to searching for knowledge in a merely accumulative manner. To "know with labour and most amply" is as painful and tormenting--and occasionally as depressing, as when one discovers unsavory tendencies in oneself and others--as it can be soothing and gratifying; and there are few poets in Graves's time who succeed in rendering both the process and consequences of getting to know one's self and one's world with such ardent and unwavering concision.

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<sup>65</sup>Kirkham, 102.

## Chapter Four

### "A Private Wonder": Knowledge and Bewilderment in Graves and Riding

"When I use a word," Humpty-Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less. "<sup>1</sup>

It seems more than coincidental that in the same year that Graves began his association with Laura Riding, he praised Humpty-Dumpty as representative of the "poetic tragic-comic element in English."<sup>2</sup> Riding, much like the fastidious Humpty-Dumpty, insists that her words mean precisely what she chooses them to mean. The degree to which Graves's poetry was affected by his admiration for Riding's formidably individualistic attitudes towards language has been open to dispute since J. M. Cohen's study of Graves's poetry in 1960. When the issue of Riding's influence upon Graves's poetry arises, most critics are compelled to take sides. Those in Graves's camp (Day, Carter, Seymour-Smith) claim that he undoubtedly learned a great deal during his relationship with Riding, but that any of the ideas which he "borrowed" from her are transmuted and clarified in his own more scrutable poetry.<sup>3</sup> Those in Riding's camp (Davie,

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass, quoted in Robert Graves's Impenetrability; or, The Proper Habit of English (London: Hogarth, 1926) 52.

<sup>2</sup>Graves, Impenetrability, 52.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Seymour-Smith claims that Graves "had by far the superior technical skill. He had more know-how, about poems, than she, and she knew it. That her suggestions [regarding Graves's drafts] were generally constructive and helpful, however, is beyond doubt." Robert Graves: His Life

Kirkham, Wexler) assert that the improvement in Graves's poetry during their fifteen-year association is a momentous proof of her superior talent and insight. If one finds, as I do, many stretches of Riding's poetry to be hermetically sealed from attempts at even the crudest paraphrase, then the only way to attempt to understand what Graves gained from Riding's example is to examine where traces and hints of her less puzzling concerns emerge in his poems.

As I argue throughout this chapter, Graves's poetry became much more concerned with the vagaries of the intellect and its effects upon our bodies as well as our emotions. He acquired a blunt scepticism and cerebral focus from Riding which it is unlikely that he could have assimilated from any of his poetic predecessors or contemporaries. During his relationship with Riding, his poetry is very much concerned with the responsibilities of the mind in its putative control of the entire person.

The question of ownership in the realm of ideas--particularly literary ideas, which are often viewed as inseparable from their specific linguistic contexts--is riddled with at least as much obfuscation, indignation, embattled egotism, and third-party interferences as it is in the more graspable realm of property.<sup>4</sup> There is no denying

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and Work (New York: Holt, 1982) 249.

<sup>4</sup>Graves's "pilfering practices" are the subject of Riding's letter in the Sept. 24, 1987 New York Review of Books. In Chelsea 35 she reproduces two letters written in

that Graves's poetic practice underwent significant modification during his association with Riding. Much of the trenchant scepticism of his mature poetic voice echoes Riding's own censorious tone. Also, her concerns with the slipperiness of language, as well as the mind/body problem became two of Graves's chief interests after their meeting.

Yet it need not follow that once one has admitted that Graves received a great deal of inspiration and technical guidance from Riding, one must characterize some of his poetry as so much cleverly repackaged literary merchandise. In this chapter, I will select certain predominant themes and modes of approach in Riding's poems and examine how similar ideas and strategies are handled in Graves's poems. I have no doubt that Graves benefitted tremendously from Riding's example and assistance, but I see this as an opportunity to understand his poetry in a different light rather than as a chance to devalue his work and label him as some kind of intellectual burglar.<sup>5</sup>

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reponse to reviews of Graves's Collected Poems 1975 in The Times Literary Supplement. The second letter shows the vituperative powers of Riding at full tilt when she refers to the "nightmare proportions of Mr. Graves's personal myth, by which he transvestitely garbs himself in the habiliments of my thought."

<sup>5</sup>In Michael Kirkham's "Robert Graves's Debt to Laura Riding," Kirkham asks "What actually happens to the thought, manner and diction of Laura Riding when they are evacuated from their original context and resettled in the very different environment of his?" (33) and concludes "He went to her to enlarge his poetry, to stiffen it with intellectual authority. In most cases her thought--felt as inseparable from her personality--merely became another

For the purposes of argument, I will divide my study of what I view as Riding's most characteristic and influential quality (and the one most valued by Graves)--her sternly vigilant circumspection--into three general segments. Firstly, I will examine her profound distrust of language, especially that which she regards as the poet's exaggerated (and decadent) concern for pleasing arrangements of words. Secondly, I wish to investigate her continual distrust of the body, and lastly I will explore her determination to curtail any emotional posturing in her verse. Each of these aspects of her poetry had a considerable effect upon Graves, both in intensifying his previous scepticisms with regard to knowledge and in challenging some of his inherently emotionally-driven writing.

Before analyzing specific poems in which I perceive these general tendencies, it will be helpful to outline briefly some of the typical responses to Riding's work. Most of her critics show a qualified but distinct admiration for her original and careful management of abstract terms, yet very few seem to admit to any lasting satisfaction with entire poems of hers.<sup>6</sup> Among the early reviewers of her

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source of conflict within the poem; ideas became an expression of violent emotion." (43) Focus on Robert Graves (Dec. 1973) 3: 33-43.

<sup>6</sup>The sole book-length study of Riding's poetry, Joyce Piell Wexler's Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth (Athens: Ohio UP, 1979) is predominantly appreciative of Riding's poetry, and this unwavering admiration for Riding's work unfortunately leads Wexler to take things like Riding's "spirituality" and

Collected Poems (1938), H. R. Hays is disturbed by the poetry's display of "such an imprisoning self-consciousness, such a dry dissection of the last cerebral quiver"; and he feels that "instead of honestly aiming at the target, she insists on looking into an arrangement of mirrors and firing over her shoulder."<sup>7</sup> R. P. Blackmur's comments that "meanings beat against each other like nothing but words; we have verbalism in extremis" and decides that she has "an obsession with the problem (not the experience) of identity."<sup>8</sup> Janet Adam Smith observes perceptively that: "Miss Riding achieves lines as pregnant as a proverb.... but proverbs and maxims are unreadable in bulk;" "[S]he seems to be trying to make us apprehend universals as vividly as we usually apprehend particulars;" "[She] overemphasizes the need for a particular kind of austerity."<sup>9</sup>

Even those who are largely supportive of Riding's poetry concede that there is something peculiarly abstract and diagrammatic about it, as is implied in Sonia Raiziss's

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her "universal" voice for granted. For instance, in her discussion of the late poem, "Memories of Mortalities," she avers that Riding "stops short of speaking about her present immortal existence" (122).

<sup>7</sup>H. R. Hays, "The Expatriate Consciousness," rev. of Collected Poems of Laura Riding, Poetry: A Magazine of Verse May 1939:101, 102.

<sup>8</sup>R. P. Blackmur, rev. of Collected Poems of Laura Riding, Partisan Review 6 (1939): 109

<sup>9</sup>Janet Adam Smith, rev. of Collected Poems of Laura Riding, The Criterion 18 (1938-39): 114.



comments that "her [poems] stand aloof in a rare surveyor's landscape, in a dry sharp yet subtle De Chirico light" and that "each term functions like the number-letter in a theorem."<sup>10</sup> Michael Kirkham observes that her poems have "an air of thus far and no farther in their demarcation of meanings," and considers that "there is no attempt to enact feeling, but feeling is the accompaniment of her desire to extract the essence of experiences."<sup>11</sup>

Kirkham's valuable observation provides a good starting point for entering the forbidding world of Riding's poetry. Her relentless struggle to convey essences, as opposed to likenesses and interrelationships, is perhaps nowhere more evident than in her poems which explore the continual fallings-short of our attempts to make our words mean what they say. An early poem, "The World and I" is a particularly telling example of her anxiety about this intense compulsion to capture the essence of an experience in words:

This is not exactly what I mean  
 Any more than the sun is the sun.  
 But how to mean more closely  
 If the sun shines but approximately?  
 What a world of awkwardness!  
 What hostile implements of sense!  
 Perhaps this is as close a meaning  
 As perhaps becomes such knowing.  
 Else I think the world and I  
 Must live together as strangers and die--

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<sup>10</sup>Sonia Raiziss, "An Appreciation," Chelsea 12 (1975): 28.

<sup>11</sup>Michael Kirkham, "Laura Riding's Poems," Cambridge Quarterly Spring 1971: 307.

A sour love, each doubtful whether  
 Was ever a thing to love the other.  
 No, better for both to be nearly sure  
 Each of each--exactly where  
 Exactly I and exactly the world  
 Fail to meet by a moment, and a word.<sup>12</sup>

The frustration conveyed in the first four lines differs considerably from the more theatrical and emotionally vulnerable proclamation of, say, Eliot's Prufrock ("It is impossible to say just what I mean").<sup>13</sup> The relative banality with which the opening paradox is delivered is soon followed by a more anxious tone in the lines "What a world of awkwardness!/ What hostile implements of sense!" The phrase "hostile implements" has a decidedly queer ring to it. The adjective "hostile" is the first obviously emotionally-charged word in the poem, and, when it is used to modify "implements"--a word which conjures up associations with surgical equipment or light machinery--the clashing ideas of simmering anger and impartial utility may cause the reader to reflect upon the singular exasperation experienced by a poet. The nagging suspicion that words are somehow malevolently unco-operative when they are used to formulate and convey our fullest experience of being in and with the world grows into a permanent temperamental disposition in much of Riding's poetry.

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<sup>12</sup>Laura Riding, Collected Poems of Laura (Riding) Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980) 187. All subsequent quotations of Riding's poetry will be taken from this text.

<sup>13</sup>T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1974) 16.

To underscore her distrust of language would be to go a meagre distance in distinguishing Riding from many poets of the early twentieth century. One essential difference between the way in which her distrust is manifested and that of poets like Edward Thomas (cf. "Old Man"--"The names/ Half decorate, half perplex the thing it is")<sup>14</sup> or T. S. Eliot (cf. "East Coker"--"shabby equipment always deteriorating/ In the general mess of imprecision of feeling")<sup>15</sup> is that she resists what she views as one of the most insidious lures of poetry itself--sonorous and elegant phrasing. Apart from her declarations in the preface to her Selected Poems of her contempt for "applied literary polish," and for "the steady-handedness with which [most poetry] is conducted [so that it has] the appearance of moral care,"<sup>16</sup> there are only hints in her poetry to suggest that she could have composed a more "polished" body of poetry herself. Lines such as "The rugged black of anger/ Has an uncertain smile-border" (CP 68) and "Drift off and fall/ Like thistledown without a bruise" (CP 33) are two rare examples of successfully memorable poetic phrasings in her oeuvre. Notwithstanding the scantiness of evidence that one can gather to prove that Riding could have written poetry with

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<sup>14</sup>Edward Thomas, "Old Man," Collected Poems by Edward Thomas (London: Faber, 1964) 104.

<sup>15</sup>Eliot, 203.

<sup>16</sup>Laura Riding, Selected Poems in Five Sets (London: Faber, 1971) 12.

more conventionally felicitous turns of phrase, her mind-tauntingly difficult combinations of words and phrases do show that her words are selected with a deliberateness equal to that of just about any accomplished poet. Riding is obsessively concerned with making words convey difficult meaning as faithfully as possible.

Difficulties proliferate when one is trying to discuss a poet who thrives on paradoxes. John Crowe Ransom, the American poet who was partly responsible for the meeting of Riding and Graves, said in a letter to Graves that "[Riding] tries perhaps to put more into poetry than it will bear."<sup>17</sup> As in "The World and I," one frequently senses Riding's desire to explain "Exactly where/ Exactly I and exactly the world/ Fail to meet by a moment, and a word." Poetry will only bear so much of the poet's tormented realization that one can only be "nearly sure" of oneself and one's world.

Like an uncompromising math instructor who has no time for a student who is happy with his answer being "close enough," Riding is impatient with what she perceives to be the imprecision with which most writers use language. Her extraordinary dissatisfaction with merely linguistic fluency--as opposed to her avowed meticulous attentiveness to the semantic value of each word she uses--causes her to set a standard which she cannot possibly uphold herself.

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<sup>17</sup>John Crowe Ransom, "To Robert Graves," 23 Sept. 1925, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, eds. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985)

Her renunciation of poetry in 1938 seems to be an admission of this inability. Riding frequently alludes to an order, or a knowledge, or even a perfection which lies beyond the grasp of language. There is little solace or contentment for her in this sense of being almost in the light of truth, or not quite yet living fully in the present; there is only the indomitable will to keep inching nearer to this quasi-religious state of being. These lingering feelings of insufficiency and blinkered awareness are evident in lines like "Between the word and the world lie/ Fading eternities of soon" ("Echoes" CP 74); "Will beauty, can beauty,/ Allay the deficiency?/ (Never quite, never quite.)" ("Enough" CP 43); "And we remembering forget,/ Mistake the future for the past,/ Worrying fast/ Back to a long ago/ Not yet to-morrow" ("The Definition of Love" CP 80); and "A same bewilderment of mind marries our proximate occasions,/ Yet perhaps no more tokens/ Than a colliding of the rapt" ("Though in One Time" CP 96).

All of these quotations share a certain gnomic inscrutability; nevertheless, one can detect in them a common concern with the unfulfilling nature of imperfectly apprehended experience. Riding rarely lets us forget that language both advances our self-understanding and gets in the way of it, tempting us into a false and prideful detachment from our essential selves. It should come as no surprise that Graves's most successful poem about the

intractability of language, "The Cool Web," was written shortly after he and Riding became acquainted. (Indeed, the manuscript version in the Lockwood Memorial Library shows that Graves dedicated this poem to Riding.) Yet Riding's full-scale assault upon customary usages of language, as in her poems "The Talking World," "Death as Death," "The Dilemmist," and "Come, Words, Away," makes us realize that Graves's disquieting lines "There's a cool web of language winds us in,/ Retreat from too much joy or too much fear" (CP 39) are far less pessimistic than Riding's "truth is anybody's argument/ Who can use words untruthfully enough/ To build eternity inside his own short mouth" ("The Talking World" CP 191).

The scope of Riding's contempt for what she regards as irresponsible use of language is vastly broader than that of Graves. In the third stanza of "The Talking World" she writes:

The nicest thought is only gossip  
 If merchandized into plain language and sold  
 For so much understanding to the minute.  
 Gossip's the mortal measure.  
 Whatever can't be talked  
 In the closed idiom of yesterday,  
 That's silence worth and time-free  
 As a full purport must to-day be. (CP 191)

The first three lines of this stanza are clear enough, whereas the fourth seems to be a slightly compressed assertion that equates careless speech with a kind of death-in-life. The kind of thought which is opposed to the "gossip" is described in predominantly negative terms, so it

is difficult to understand just what it might be. The unappealing ephemerality of "the closed idiom of yesterday" is contrasted with talk that is "silence worth" (i.e., worthy of silence?) and "time-free" (i.e., partaking of eternity?) When attempting to understand Riding's poems, one may too rapidly seek to "decode" the poem into the roomier syntax of prose, which, however unsatisfactory, is perhaps the only way to begin to comprehend her idiosyncratic phrasing. Contrary to Riding's assertions that prose explanations attempt to supplant the poem,<sup>18</sup> I think that such heuristic probings are necessary if we are to come close to determining what the actual words in the poem are doing.

When one attempts to unpack the meaning of the simile in the last two lines of the third stanza, the phrases "silence-worth" and "time-free" become a little less puzzling. The inner resolve and concentration which are involved in focussing on what is most needful at a given moment are implied in the notion of the "full purport of to-

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<sup>18</sup>In the section of Riding and Graves' A Survey of Modernist Poetry (London: Heinemann, 1927) where they examine Riding's poem "The Rugged Black of Anger," this rather condescending comment about the "plain reader" is made: "While he does not object to the poetic state of mind in the poet, he has a fear of cultivating it in himself. This is why he prefers the prose summary to the poem and to see the poem, as it began in the poet's mind, as a genial prose idea free of those terrors which the poet is supposed to keep to himself or carefully disguise. Part of the reader's reaction to what he calls the obscurity of certain poems is really his nervous embarrassment at feeling himself alone with the meaning of the poem itself." (150-51)

day." To undertake one's speech acts with a firm deliberateness is in a sense to be free of the past-infatuated garrulousness of gossip. For Riding, idle use of language is always symptomatic of a widespread laxity of thought.

That which she persistently regards as linguistic idleness may be for others, including Graves, a momentary acceptance of the limitations of poetic utterance. At times, one is willing to believe that Riding has ideas that cannot be expressed in words. Her notorious use of multiple negative forms in her poems, especially in the longer ones, forces the reader into a prolonged mental squinting to construe any meaning at all in certain passages (e.g., "The Signs of Knowledge:" "oh learn/ Lest unlife of the earth be in you/ And you know it not, to welcome what unlove of the sun undarks" CP 214). In Graves's work, there are occasional admissions that certain kinds of experience--usually emotionally-based--are flatly resistant to linguistic representation, but this induces him to acknowledge openly the tacitly understood boundaries of language. Riding, on the other hand, insists that the words which she employs match her most unusual thoughts as intimately as possible. If one compares Graves's "The Yet Unsayable" with the final stanza of Riding's "When Love Becomes Words," one can see where their methods diverge when they address a roughly similar idea.



It was always fiercer, brighter, gentler than could be  
told

Even in words quickened by Truth's dark eye:  
Its absence, whirlpool; its presence, deluge;  
Its time, astonishment; its magnitude,  
A murderous dagger-point.

So we surrender  
Our voices to the dried and scurrying leaves  
And choose from our own long-predetermined path  
From the unsaid to the yet unsayable  
In silence of love and love's temerity. (CP 380)

And then to words again  
After--was it--a kiss or exclamation  
Between face and face too sudden to record.  
Our love being now a span of mind  
Whose bridge not the droll body is  
Striding the waters of disunion  
With a sulky grin and groaning valour,  
We can make love miraculous  
As joining thought with thought and a next,  
Which is done not by crossing over  
But by knowing the words for what we mean.  
We forbear to move, it seeming to us now  
More like ourselves to keep the written watch  
And let the reach of love surround us  
With the warm accusation of being poets. (CP 310)

Whereas Graves's poem bears witness to the feeling that the passionate intensity of love cannot be captured in words, Riding sees this as a condition which calls for a stricter attention to language. Graves hints at a faith in the experience of love itself, whether or not it can be adequately rendered in words. It amounts to a kind of corporeal faith which bargains on mutual "silence" and "temerity." It is as if the keenness with which this love is felt would be mocked by the relative banality of even the most romantic phrases. The loving confidence that these ardent feelings ("the unsaid") will perhaps change with time but still remain verbally inexpressible ("the yet

unsayable") points to a certainty which, in a sense, lies outside of the poem. As in many of Graves's love poems, the insistence of the speaker is meant to ensure the sincerity of his feelings. This poem shows Graves once again striving to reinforce the conviction in the second half of his epigram "A Plea to Boys and Girls": "call the man a liar who says I wrote/ All that I wrote in love, for love of art" (CP 192).

The internal commotion inspired by intense love--which Graves characterizes as a "deluge" and "astonishment"--is viewed by Riding as "too sudden to record." Riding places value upon the intellectual consummation of love: "We can make love miraculous/ As joining thought with thought and a next." In fact, the love of which Riding writes only takes on significance by eschewing the "droll body" and "by knowing the words for what we mean." Although both poets yearn to write about a transcendent aspect of human love, their attitudes toward how language can best convey this desire are at considerable variance with each other. Graves concedes that they must "surrender" their "voices to the dried and scurrying leaves" while Riding, ever vigilant, implores that they "keep the written watch/ And let the reach of love" surround them.

Riding's "written watch" of her own "span of mind" is one of the most distinguishing features of her poetry. Graves's own self-watchfulness increased substantially in

the poetry he published while he was associated with Riding. One gathers from many of Riding's poems that a merciless self-surveillance of one's moods, impulses, and stray thoughts is essential if one is to conquer the sense of purposelessness which may preside over our vision of our merely animal persistence in life. She repeatedly laments the inconstancy which dominates our behaviour when our wills are divided or in abeyance. Whims, standstills, flutterings, fidgetings, postponements, and hesitations are repeatedly under attack in her work. "The Why of the Wind" is a clear example of her impatience with the transitory disturbances that invade too much of our lives:

We have often considered the wind,  
 The changing whys of the wind.  
 Of other weather we do not so wonder.  
 These are the changes we know.  
 Our own health is not otherwise.  
 We wake up with a shiver,  
 Go to bed with a fever:  
 These are the turns by which nature persists,  
 By which, whether ailing or well,  
 We variably live,  
 Such mixed we, and such variable world.  
 It is the very rule of thriving  
 To be thus one day, and thus the next.  
 We do not wonder.  
 When the cold comes we shut the window.  
 That is winter, and we understand.  
 Does our own blood not do the same,  
 Now freeze, now flame within us,  
 According to the rhythmic-fickle climates  
 Of our lives with ourselves?

But when the wind springs like a toothless hound  
 And we are not even savaged,  
 Only as if upbraided for we know not what  
 And cannot answer--  
 What is there to do, if not to understand?  
 And this we cannot,  
 Though when the wind is loose

Our minds go gasping wind-infected  
 To our mother hearts,  
 Seeking in whys of blood  
 The logic of this massacre of thought.

When the wind runs we run with it.  
 We cannot understand because we are not  
 When the wind takes our minds.  
 These are lapses like a hate of earth.  
 We stand as nowhere,  
 Blow from discontinuance to discontinuance,  
 Then flee to what we are  
 And accuse our sober nature  
 Of wild desertion of itself,  
 And ask the reason a traitor might  
 Beg from a king a why of treason.

We must learn better  
 What we are and are not.  
 We are not the wind.  
 We are not every vagrant mood that tempts  
 Our minds to giddy homelessness.  
 We must distinguish better  
 Between ourselves and strangers.  
 There is much that we are not.  
 There is much that is not.  
 There is much that we have not to be.  
 We surrender to the enormous wind  
 Against our learned littleness  
 But keep returning wailing  
 'Why did I do this?' (CP 292)

Except for the droning rhythm of the poem--as in the three lines beginning with "There is" in the final stanza (at times perhaps reminding one of the vague circular hum of a noisy refrigerator)--the poem does awaken one to the urgency of the speaker's discontent. Other examples of Riding's rigidly-held convictions concerning the futile impulsiveness and bleak insignificance of so much of one's usually unexamined daily life can be seen in the following excerpts:

His world has been a fitful veering,  
 Paling and blush of troth and impulse,

Pleasure and resolve.

"The Last Covenant" (CP 240)

In this stirring and standstill  
 Which is not natural.  
 Which is not trivial,  
 Not peaceful, not beautiful,  
 Altogether unwoeful,  
 Without significance  
 Or indeed any further sense  
 Than going and returning  
 Within one inch,  
 Than rising and falling  
 Within one breath,  
 Than sweltering and shivering  
 Between one minute and the next  
 In the most artless  
 And least purposeful  
 Possible purpose.

"All Nothing, Nothing" (CP 103)

The course of a day is never steady.  
 The hours experiment with pain and pleasure.  
 By bedtime all you know is giddiness.

How long is it permitted  
 So little done so much to call?

"And a Day" (CP 157)

Riding's deadpan delivery of these chilling observations about human inconstancy strengthens their impact. If one is inclined to dismiss such observations as the products of a profoundly despairing mind, one must first prove that the poet is wallowing in these thoughts rather than acknowledging them in order to overcome them. The renunciation and temperance which are called for in "The Why of the Wind," for instance, could be read in the spirit of the moral recommendations of thinkers as unlike Riding as the Socrates of Gorgias who attests that "As long as the soul is in a bad way, it will be witless and uncontrolled, unjust and impious, and we must keep it from its desires and

allow it no action except what will improve it;"<sup>19</sup> or the Lawrencian mouthpiece, Rupert Birkin, in Women in Love, who argues that "to stare straight at this life we've brought upon ourselves and rejected, absolutely smash up the old idea of ourselves, that we shall never do. You've got very badly to want to get rid of the old before anything new will appear--even in the self."<sup>20</sup> Although there is much in Riding's poetry that is strange and intellectually taxing, there is nothing abstruse about her detestation of mankind's leniency towards its own shortcomings.

One finds a similar impatience with inconstancy in Graves's poems, such as "To Walk on Hills," "The Legs," "Trudge Body," "In No Direction," "Despite and Still," and "Dragons," the last of which appeared initially in Poems 1925-30, and was not republished in Collected Poems 1975. "Dragons," more so than the other poems mentioned, displays a distinctly Ridingsque obstinacy in its repudiation of human waywardness:

These ancient dragons not committed yet  
 To any certain manner,  
 To any final matter,  
 Ranging creation recklessly,  
 Empowered to overset  
 Natural form and fate,  
 Freaking the sober species,  
 Smoothing rough accident to be  
 Level in a long series

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<sup>19</sup>Plato, Gorgias, trans. and ed. by W. C. Helmholtz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979) 79.

<sup>20</sup>D. H. Lawrence, Women in Love, (Markham: Penguin, 1978) 59.

And, each new century,  
 Forging for God a newer signet--  
 To these wild monsters boasting  
 Over and over  
 Their unchecked tyranny,  
 The only not a monster  
 In a small voice calling  
 Answered despitefully:  
 "Dragons, you count for nothing;  
 You are no more than weather,  
 The year's unsteadfastness  
 To which, now summer-basking,  
 To which, now in distress  
 Midwinter-shivering,  
 The mind pays no honour."<sup>21</sup>

As in "The Why of the Wind," mankind's dithering behaviour is likened to the unpredictability of the weather. Both poems treat the merely reactive and automatic responses of the body to external conditions as representative of corresponding mental vacillations (e.g., Riding's "we wake up with a shiver/ Go to bed with fever;" Graves's "now summer basking"...."now in distress/ Midwinter-shivering"). Each poem argues against tolerating behaviour like that of Dickens' Richard Carstone from Bleak House who has "a fancy that everything could catch and nothing could hold."<sup>22</sup>

As enviable as the firm conviction of the "only not a monster" may be, such resolve is not very convincing because we are not presented with any evidence of the nature of the struggle between the temptation to unsteadfastness and the need for self-control. Whereas Graves's reckless dragons

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<sup>21</sup>Robert Graves, "Dragons," Poems 1926-30 (London: Heinemann, 1931) 69.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Dickens, Bleak House (Toronto: Bantam, 1983) 224.

are swept aside by the dismissive authority of "the mind [which] pays no honour" to them, Riding's "rhythmic-fickle climates" are not to be resisted without continuous effort, lest one keeps "returning wailing 'Why did I do this?'"

The theme of inconstancy is bound to be an ever-surfacing one in two poets like Riding and Graves who adhere so faithfully to dualistic conceptions which divide our existence into mind/body and head/heart oppositions. The major difference between their management of these ideas is one of temperament. What Graves gains in his efforts to be as lucid as possible, he loses in his avoidance of certain complexities; contrariwise, what Riding gains in her unremitting unorthodoxy and stern persistence, she loses in her cantankerous inscrutability. In Graves's "The Legs," for instance, we encounter a much more self-mocking and credible persona than that of the "not a monster" of "Dragons"; and in Riding's "Pride of Head" there is at least a provisional recognition of the mind's tolerance of the body's uncontrollable nature which is so thoroughly despised in "The Why of the Wind."

There was this road,  
And it led up-hill,  
And it led down-hill,  
And round and in and out.

And the traffic was legs,  
Legs from the knees down,  
Coming and going,  
Never pausing.

And the gutters gurgled  
With the rain's overflow,



And the sticks on the pavement  
Flindly tapped and tapped.

What drew the legs along  
Was the never-stopping,  
And the senseless, frightening  
Fate of being legs.

Legs for the road,  
The road for legs,  
Resolutely nowhere  
In both directions.

My legs at least  
Were not in that rout:  
On grass by the roadside  
Entire I stood,

Watching the unstoppable  
Legs go by  
With never a stumble  
Between step and step.

Though my smile was broad  
The legs could not see,  
Though my laugh was loud  
The legs could not hear.

My head dizzied then:  
I wondered suddenly,  
Might I too be a walker  
From the knees down?

Gently I touched my shins.  
The doubt unchained them:  
They had run in twenty puddles  
Before I regained them. (CP 59)

If it were set anywhere else but so,  
Rolling in its private exact socket  
Like the sun set in a joint on a mountain...  
But here, nodding and blowing on my neck,  
Of no precedent in nature  
Or the beauties of architecture,  
Flying my hair like a field of corn  
Chance-sown on the neglected side of a hill,  
My head is at the top of me  
Where I live mostly and most of the time,  
Where my face turns an inner look  
On what's outside of me  
And meets the challenge of other things

Haughtily, by being what it is.

From this place of pride,  
 Gem of the larger, lazy continent just under it,  
 I, the idol of the head,  
 An autocrat sitting with my purposes crossed under me,  
 Watch and worry benignly over the rest,  
 Send all the streams of sense running down  
 To explore the savage, half-awakened land,  
 Tremendous continent of this tiny isle,  
 And civilize it as well as they can. (CP 23)

Much of the ironic effect of "The Legs" is achieved by Graves's use of the bald style: he takes plain speech to a deliberate extreme by deadening the rhythms with an abundance of monosyllabic words, as well as by his tedious repetition of the word "and." The speaker's momentary aloof satisfaction ("My legs at least/ Were not in that rout") is marvellously undercut by the head's sudden inability to establish what exactly might distinguish its own legs "which could not see" and "could not hear" from the other legs which were going "resolutely nowhere." That this recognition is brought about by the speaker's head being "dizzied" is especially appropriate, since this whirling sensation of dizziness is a human reponse in which the physical components are veritably inseparable from the psychological ones.

The good-humoured, ironic awareness that the mind is destined to be at times subject to the overmastering spontaneity of the body as conveyed by Graves in "The Legs" is not shared by Riding in "Pride of Head." Although the title would seem to prepare one for inferring the negative

aspects of intellectual pride, the poem doesn't fulfil this expectation. In fact, the only negative feelings shown toward the "head" are inspired by its corporeal vulnerability: it is set "nodding and blowing on [the] neck." The frank admission that "My head is at the top of me/ Where I live mostly and most of the time" is followed by the paradoxical elaboration "Where my face turns an inner look/ On what's outside of me." The latter sentence is confusing because one normally thinks of an "inner look" as denoting mental self-examination or introspection. Yet it seems that Riding uses the phrase to remind us that our glances at the "outside" world are conducted from an inner vantage point. It is characteristic of Riding's high opinion of the commanding intellect that she shows the "idol of the head" "send[ing] all the streams of sense running down/ To explore the savage, half-awakened land," instead of showing the head as initially being the passive receptor of information from the senses.

The only concession made to the "lazy continent" of the body is that it is such a tremendous area when compared to the "tiny isle" of the head that it can partially resist the "civilizing" motives of the autocratic "place of pride." Throughout Riding's poetry, the body is variously viewed as an encumbrance, an obstacle, and, in "Because of Clothes," a "shadow:"

Without dressmakers to connect  
The good-will of the body

With the purpose of the head,  
 We should be two worlds  
 Instead of a world and its shadow  
 The flesh.

The head is one world  
 And the body is another--  
 The same, but somewhat slower  
 And more dazed and earlier,  
 The divergence being corrected  
 In dress.

There is an odour of Christ  
 In the cloth: below the chin  
 No harm is meant. Even, immune  
 From capital test, wisdom flowers  
 Out of the shaded breast, and the thighs  
 Are meek.

The union of matter with mind  
 By the method of raiment  
 Destroys not our nakedness  
 Nor muffles the bell of thought.  
 Merely the moment to its dumb hour  
 Is joined.

Inner is the glow of knowledge  
 And outer is the gloom of appearance.  
 But putting on the cloak and cap  
 With only the hands and face showing,  
 We turn the gloom in and the glow forth  
 Softly.

Wherefore, by the neutral grace  
 Of the needle, we possess our triumphs  
 Together with our defeats  
 In single balanced couplement:  
 We pause between sense and foolishness,  
 And live. (CP 285)

Riding rarely misses an opportunity to exploit the mysterious juncture of the body and the mind. Yet, as in "Pride of Head," the mind is immediately accorded such primacy over the body that one may find the investigation of the relationship to be biased from the outset. An essential difference between Riding's and Graves's perspectives upon

this problem is evident if we compare "Because of Clothes" with Graves's "Certain Mercies." {This poem is quoted in full in Chapter One} The sardonic logic of Graves's poem builds from the second stanza's question "Must we henceforth be grateful/ That the guards, though spiteful/ Are slow of foot and wit?" to the final inquiry which emphasizes the vividness of the physical wretchedness of imprisonment in spite of any intellectual stoicism: "[Must we henceforth be grateful....] "That each new indignity/ Defeats only the body,/ Pampering the spirit/ With obscure, proud merit?" (CP 90)

In "Certain Mercies," Graves acknowledges the conventional separation of the mind from the body only to subvert the specious kind of accolade customarily given to the enduring, rationalizing spirit. The poem demonstrates the absurdity of being "grateful" for a defeat of the body on the grounds that the degree of bodily defeat is somehow inversely proportional to a measure of spiritual triumph. Riding acknowledges a similar separation of body and mind, yet unlike Graves, she places far more trust in the "purpose of the head" than in the "slower, more dazed" world of the body. Before examining Riding's poem more closely, it might be helpful to consider what problems can arise when words like "head," "mind," and "thought" are used interchangeably.

The Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle's The Concept of Mind provides numerous examples of the ways in which our

writing about the mind is often marred by what he calls "category-mistakes."<sup>23</sup> He proposes that "the belief that there is a polar opposition between Mind and Matter is the belief that they are terms of the same logical type," and that "people tend to identify their minds with the 'place' where they conduct their secret thoughts."<sup>24</sup> Ryle attacks what he considers to be the false moves inherent in "the 'reduction' of the material world to mental states and processes, as well as the 'reduction' of mental states and processes to physical states and processes."<sup>25</sup> The description of the corporeal component of the human being as a "shadow" in the first stanza of "Because of Clothes" seems to be based upon a variety of the understandable--but according to Ryle, misguided--desire to see the mind and the body as opposing entities of the same logical type. By referring to the "good will" of the body," Riding immediately converts the body into something capable of thoughtful behavior. She further blends distinct categories of mind and body when she refers to the "purpose of the head" instead of using a more semantically accurate phrase such as the "purpose of the mind."

One could be accused of merely splitting hairs in

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<sup>23</sup>Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1949) 18.

<sup>24</sup>Ryle, 27.

<sup>25</sup>Ryle, 22.

pointing to the distinction between "head" and "mind," or one could stand guilty of deliberately ignoring the accepted metonymic function of "head" in coinages like "use your head" (when we implore someone to think carefully), or "she's got a good head on her shoulders" (when we wish to acknowledge a person's unfailing common sense). Yet when we use words like "head" and "mind" interchangeably in conversation, we are not usually involved in an exploration of the mind's relationship to the body. In "Because of Clothes," as in "Pride of Head" and several other poems, Riding views the body not so much as something different in kind from the mind, but rather as something like a sub-species of it, and a decidedly inferior one at that.

Once one is alerted to one questionable category-crossing in "Because of Clothes," one begins to wonder about the validity of her other comparisons. For instance, although the lines from stanza five--"Inner is the glow of knowledge/ And outer is the gloom of appearance"--seem to have a surface neatness in their oppositions, the parallel is not quite balanced. Given the straightforward opposing pairs "Inner"/ "Outer" and "glow"/ "gloom," we would expect "knowledge" to be opposed to ignorance, not "appearance." Similarly, we may admire the commanding metaphor of the dressmaker's "neutral grace" in balancing the diverging demands of the body and the mind, but it is spoiled by the final stanza's equating of "sense and foolishness" with

"mind and body" because it relies upon regarding the body as though we could sensibly refer to it as being either foolish or wise.<sup>26</sup>

There is no question that Graves's poems became much more "mind"-centered after he met Riding, but, with the exception of a few poems like "The Foolish Senses," "Trudge Body," and "To Walk on Hills," he rarely gives the kind of overweening authority to the mind that Riding does. The tension created by the rival claims of the body and the mind which pervades Graves's poetry seems to be increased by Riding's generally ascetic influence upon his work. For her, the mind is the stern disciplinarian whose task is to control the impulsiveness of the body's urges for

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<sup>26</sup> A clearer recognition of the mutual relationship of the mind and the body can be seen in the following stanzas from John Donne's "The Ecstasy." Interestingly, the body is not viewed as a lumbering obstacle to the "intelligence" as it so often is in Riding's work.

But O, alas, so long, so far  
 Our bodies why do we forbear?  
 They are ours, though they are not we, we are  
 The intelligences, they the sphere.

We owe them thanks, because they thus,  
 Did us, to us, at first convey,  
 Yielded their forces, sense, to us,  
 Nor are dross to us, but allay.

A related point is made by Michael McCanles about the speakers in Donne's poems who "strive valiantly to think as if the conceptualistic demand for concept-object correspondence were indeed a fact," but the structure of their chain of argument "demonstrates through contradiction, paradox, reversal, and dialectic the ultimate inability of the mind to reduce the real wholly to itself." Quoted by W. E. Rogers in "Paradox in Donne" Essential Articles for the Study of Donne's Poetry, ed. John R. Roberts (Hamden: Archon Books, 1975) 217.



gratification. Two of Graves's poems which render the mind's struggle with the most potent of bodily promptings, sexual desire, are "The Succubus" and "Ulysses." Whereas Riding, in a poem like "By Crude Rotation," rather summarily dismisses the power of sexual attraction as "creaking nature" where "To [her] lot fell/.... Illusion of well-being/ Base lust and tenderness of self" (CP 107), Graves cannot even view plain lust with such detachment, as we see in "The Succubus":

Thus will despair  
 In ecstasy of nightmare  
 Fetch you a devil-woman through the air,  
 To slide below the sweated sheet  
 And kiss your lips in answer to your prayer  
 And lock her hands with yours and your feet with her  
 feet.

Yet why does she  
 Come never as longed-for beauty  
 Slender and cool, with limbs lovely to see,  
 (The bedside candle guttering high)  
 And toss her head so the thick curls fall free  
 Of halo'd breast, firm belly, and long, slender  
 thigh?

Why with hot face,  
 With paunched and uddered carcase,  
 Sudden and greedily does she embrace,  
 Gulping away your soul, she lies so close,  
 Fathering brats on you of her own race?  
 Yet is the fancy grosser than your lusts were gross?  
 (CP 57)

Although the final line of the poem shows as much intellectual disgust with purely physical coupling as anything in Riding's poetry, we would probably not find such a vigorous and gripping depiction of the dilemma in her work. The physical repulsiveness is not merely alluded to,

it is vividly presented in significant details like the "paunched and uddered carcass" and the "sweated sheet." Especially interesting, however, is the way in which Graves has sandwiched the air-brushed fantasy of the second stanza between the grotesque nightmare of the opening and final stanzas. In doing this, he gives the lie to the dreamer's idealized conception of a "pure" ("halo'd breast") sex object.

The blunt and fervid moralism of the final line in "The Succubus" is very jarring. If, for instance, one were to read the poem only as far as the penultimate line, one could certainly discern the implicit judgement upon the "longed-for beauty" of the second stanza, but the effect would be one of corrective irony rather than puritanical finger-pointing. While dreamed or day-dreamed erotic fantasies may not be particularly worthy of poetic celebration, it is plainly repressive and pointlessly guilt-inspiring to condemn imagined lustfulness as "gross."

Common to both Riding and Graves is their disdain for the perceived mindlessness in the moments when one is overcome by sexual desire. Riding suggests in "The Tiger," that "Lust, earlier than time/ Unwinds [men's] minds." Graves, upon recognizing the narrowed focus of lustful thinking, observes in "Ulysses" that

.... flesh had made him blind,  
 Flesh had one pleasure only in the act,  
 Flesh set one purpose only in the mind--  
 Triumph of flesh and afterwards to find

Still those same terrors wherewith flesh was racked.  
(CP 56)

Since the poem ends with the comment that "[Ulysses] loathed the fraud, yet would not bed alone," we are left with the unconsoling conclusion that lust is--in this case, at least --intractable. Although such a perspective may be self-defeating for the poem's protagonist, the reader may gain some cautionary insight into the false glamour of the sexual adventurer.

"Down, Wanton, Down," Graves's most energetically ribald poem, takes on a somewhat less playful aspect when viewed in the context of Graves's and Riding's disapproving views of the "Damned Thing" (as Riding referred to sex in her book on politics and society, Anarchism Is Not Enough, 1928<sup>27</sup>). In the fourth stanza, Graves debunks the eagerly upstanding penis for what he imagines as its pretensions to a more-than-physical prowess:<sup>28</sup>

Tell me, my witless, whose one boast  
Could be your staunchness at the post,  
When were you made a man of parts  
To think fine and profess the arts? (CP 78)

The waggish humour of these lines notwithstanding, the belief that the body and its parts are "witless" and unable to "think fine" accords with the occasional tendency in

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<sup>27</sup>As quoted in Wexler, 46.

<sup>28</sup>The degeneration of the dynamic role of the body in Graves's later love poetry will be discussed in fuller detail in Chapter Five.

Graves and the solid resolve in Riding to assert that all value and authority must reside in the human mind. Graves is obviously drawn to Riding's ardent faith in the organizational and discriminating powers of the mind, but, as his reference to "staunchness" in the above passage implies, he is never able to grant the mind such unqualified supremacy over the body. Nor is it clear that Graves ever fully believes that such a victory over the body could be much more than a pyrrhic one.

The mind/body dualism that pervades Riding's poetry may account partially for the difficulty which one has in determining the peculiar role of the emotions in her work. As quirky or tight-lipped as some of Graves's poems may be, they are never quite as dismissive of heightened emotional states as are Riding's. Repeatedly, one finds her implying that one's essential self is that which remains aloof from emotional turbulence. In "Helen's Faces," for example, she describes the heroine as offering her suitors "a replica of love" in order to beguile them "with fine images." The poem ends with a statement of the woman's perfect detachment:

But the original woman is mythical,  
Lies lonely against no heart.  
Her eyes are cold, see love far off,  
Read no desertion when love removes,  
The images out of fashion.

Undreamed of in her many faces,  
That each kept off the plunderer:  
Contest and bitterness never raged round her. (CP 63)

The division between the participating self and the

spectating self in Riding's work is sometimes so extreme that one questions whether such detachment is actually possible, and if so, if it is truly desirable. Reducing the conventionally exaggerated emotional turmoil of love to an opposing extreme of reflective peacefulness in her short poem "So Slight," Riding compels one to wonder at her composure:

It was as near invisible  
As night in early dusk.  
So slight it was,  
It was as unbelievable  
As day in early dawn.

The summer impulse of a leaf  
To flutter separately  
Gets death and autumn.  
Such faint rebellion  
Was lately love in me.

So slight, it had no hope or sorrow,  
It could but choose  
A passing flurry for its nuptial,  
Drift off and fall  
Like thistledown without a bruise. (CP 33)

It is as though the speaker, relying upon what appears to be a hindsighted wisdom, disavows the reputed strength of love by asserting that the impetuosity and rebelliousness of love are, after all, merely "faint" in retrospect. Despite the lovely gentleness implied by the image of the "thistledown without a bruise," one is still left to decide what kind of temperament could ever refer to love as "slight."

Whereas Riding is prone to emphasize the emotional detachment necessary for self-knowledge in terms of an

intense self-scrutiny, Graves is more likely to display his desire for detachment in terms of ironically-tinged miniature narratives. In his "Never Such Love" and "A Jealous Man," we can see that a Ridingsque cynicism toward intensely emotional states is given a reasonableness through the use of a third-person perspective. The first poem chronicles the hasty boastfulness of sexual love:

Twined together and, as is customary,  
 For words of rapture groping, they  
 'Never such love,' swore, 'ever before was!'  
 Contrast with all loves that failed or staled  
 Registered their own as love indeed.

And was this not to blab idly  
 The heart's fated inconstancy?  
 Better in love to seal the love-sure lips,  
 For truly love was before words were,  
 And no word given, no word broken.

When the name 'love' is uttered  
 (Love, the near-honorable malady  
 With which in greed and haste they  
 Each other do infect and curse)  
 Or, worse, is written down....

Wise after the event, by love withered,  
 A 'never more!' most frantically  
 Sorrow and shame would proclaim  
 Such as, they'd swear, never before were:  
 True lovers even in this. (CP 90)

The witty parallel made between the lovers' mental and physical behaviour by the word "groping," as well as the ironic reverberations which are sounded by the rubber-stamp-like connotations of "registered," combine to make one ask --as we might also of Riding's "So Slight"--what kind of love is being discussed. The alleged intensity of the lovers' feelings is soon called into question as the speaker

refers to the "heart's fated inconstancy" and the "near-honorable malady" of love. Graves cleverly illustrates how the ardent declaration of the perceived strength of one's feelings at a given time isn't necessarily proof of their longevity.

The notion that it is "[b]etter in love to seal the love-sure lips/ For truly love was before words were" is also found in Riding's poem, "Last Fellows;" but, as might have been expected, the ideal of a silent communion between lovers is conveyed by paradox and intimation:

What is the love between them?  
Talk in silence, luck in evil-boding,  
Thought endless, speech used,  
Fate in their stiff hearts,  
The never-to-be-said on their still breaths,  
As conversation between angels. (CP 105)

As odd and perhaps unconvincingly vague as the love described in these lines may appear, one can nevertheless discern the poet striving to present the incontrovertible feeling that love would be somehow profaned by human speech. The hidden, the secret, the "never-to-be-said"--when metaphors of concealment or reticence are encountered in Riding's, as well as in Graves's poems, they often signal a need for the discretion which is viewed as essential to emotional stability.

The puzzlement into which one may be thrown by attempting to understand one's own, or worse yet, someone else's intense emotional states is increased by Riding's

reluctance to allow for any conventional equivalence between self-knowledge and personal identity. This almost schizophrenic separation is evident in her early poem, "Forgotten Girlhood," where the speaker asks: "What knows in me?/ Is it only something inside/ That I can't see?" (CP 17). If we compare Riding's "And This Hard Jealousy" with Graves's "A Jealous Man," we can see that although Graves shares her view of the misguidedly antagonistic nature of jealousy, he does not approach it with the same metaphysical uncertainty.

And this hard jealousy against me  
 Of you a not sour advocate--  
 It means I think a time of when,  
 A time of not, when sourly  
 Because of not you plotted sourly  
 Against--as if against myself,  
 My not, as if against me.

I think it means.  
 When with a shade of me  
 A time of not I spelt  
 When greedily against a shade  
 You argued argue,  
 And this jealousy.

It meant I think I thought it means  
 A shade that guarded shared myself  
 To later and with fury fade  
 Into a hovering time of not.

And this hard jealousy against me  
 If now a time of when were,  
 And that hard jealousy against her  
 When with a shade she spelt. (CP 129)

To be homeless is a pride  
 To the jealous man prowling  
 Hungry down the night lanes,

Who has no steel at his side,  
 No drink hot in his mouth,



But a mind dream-enlarged,

Who witnesses warfare,  
Man with woman, hugely  
Raging from hedge to hedge:

The raw knotted oak-club  
Clenched in the raw fist,  
The ivy-noose well-flung,

The thronged din of battle,  
Gaspings of the throat-snared,  
Snores of the battered dying,

Tall corpses, braced together,  
Fallen in clammy furrows,  
Male and female,

Or, among haulms of nettle  
Humped, in noisome heaps,  
Male and female.

He glowers in the choked roadway  
Between twin churchyards,  
Like a turnip ghost.

(Here, the rain-worn headstone,  
There, the Celtic cross  
In rank white marble.)

This jealous man is smitten,  
His fear-jerked forehead  
Sweats a fine musk;

A score of bats bewitched  
By the ruttish odour  
Swoop singing at his head;

Nuns bricked up alive  
Within the neighbouring wall  
Wail in cat-like longing.

Crow, cocks, crow loud,  
Relieve the doomed devil--  
Has he not died enough?

Now, out of careless sleep,  
She wakes and greets him coldly,  
The woman at home,

She, with a private wonder  
At shoes bemired and bloody--

His war was not hers. (CP 94)

"A private wonder" turns out to be, coincidentally, an especially fitting description of Riding's poem. The wonder in her case is particularly private because Riding employs mid-sentence verb tense changes and negations in such a manner that it becomes difficult to settle upon a "public" meaning for the poem. "A time of not," for example, presumably signifies a time when affection waned between the lovers. Yet even when the same phrase is used in the second stanza in conjunction with "a shade" of the speaker, it is unclear if this "time of not spelt" was merely the imagined absence of affection on the part of the jealous person, or whether the speaker had actually withdrawn her feelings temporarily. The peculiar use of "I spelt" contributes to the confusion: is it meant to imply that the jealous person was unwarrantedly "reading into" a situation? If Riding wishes to imply that this jealousy is completely unprompted by the speaker, why does she make a point in the second line of insisting that the jealousy comes from a "not sour advocate"? The poet is presumably trying to render the befuddled state ("It meant I think I thought it means") experienced by the speaker, but, in the absence of a more particularized context for this confusion, the reader is left with the sense that such a personal confusion is simply inaccessible.

Graves's "A Jealous Man" is similarly devoid of any

direct suggestion of a solution to the disturbed state of mind, although in his case he focuses upon the workings of the jealous person's mind. However, the disturbance itself is so vividly rendered that it may at least alert one to the frightening exaggerations with which the severely crippled reasoning of jealousy is fraught. The deluded state of the jealous man is most succinctly and resonantly captured in the phrase which describes him as possessed by "a mind dream-enlarged." For the next ten stanzas, Graves elaborates upon the man's paranoid speculation in a manner which shows the galling power of the lurid and violent jealous imagination. "Male and female" "[h]umped, in noisome heaps"; "clammy furrows"; "rank white marble"; "ruttish odour"--the melodramatic ghastliness takes on a physical repulsiveness for the man entrapped by his own emotional insecurity.

The jealous man's bout with his anxiety is described in such a way as to make his estrangement from the "woman at home" seem unavoidable. Through the detached tone of the final two stanzas, Graves refrains from indulging any sentimental gloominess which might arise from the awareness of being emotionally isolated from the one with whom one ought to feel the most intimate connection. The soberly ironic view presented in the poem's closing lines emphasizes the sometimes horribly independent mental careers of two people joined in affection. Compared with the clenched

emotional composure of many speakers in Riding's poems, however, the apparently detached speakers in Graves's poems reveal a certain emotional vulnerability. Even the speaker of "A Jealous Man" shows some sympathy for the self-enclosing torment of the protagonist: "Reprieve the doomed devil--/ Has he not died enough?"

Extreme emotional continence figures largely in Riding's poetry in a manner which Graves undoubtedly admired, but was unable--or unwilling--to bring fully into his own poetry. What makes Graves such an intriguing love poet is the interplay of a powerful Ridingesque scepticism toward the emotions with his revivingly candid avowals of their strength. In Riding's poetry, amorous emotions are often mistrusted because they are seen to foster illusions, or, at best, are considered to emphasize the ultimate and unbroachable distance that separates each loving individual. The latter view is evident in the following passage from her "Rhythms of Love":

You bring me messages  
 From days and years  
 In your time-clouded eyes  
 And I reply to these  
 And we know nothing of each other  
 But a habit, and this is ancient.  
 How we approach is hidden in a dream.  
 We close our eyes, we clutch at bodies,  
 We rise at dream's length from each other  
 And love mysteriously and coldly  
 Strangers we seem to love by memory. (CP 114)

When Graves attempts to cope with the kind of emotional isolation which is so chillingly outlined in the above

passage by Riding, he is more inclined than her to see the questionable workings of the mind as complicit in heightening one's sense of seclusion. "The Terraced Valley" shows Graves tracing the alluring false orderliness of thought which is unballasted by an awareness of one's emotional subjectivity:

In a deep thought of you and concentration  
 I came by hazard to a new region:  
 The unnecessary sun was not there,  
 The necessary earth lay without care--  
 For more than sunshine warmed the skin  
 Of the round world that was turned outside-in.

Calm sea beyond the terraced valley  
 Without horizon easily was spread,  
 As it were overhead,  
 Washing the mountain-spurs behind me:  
 The unnecessary sky was not there,  
 Therefore no heights, no deeps, no birds of the air.

Neat outside-inside, neat below-above,  
 Hermaphroditizing love.  
 Neat this-way-that-way and without mistake:  
 On the right hand could slide the left glove.  
 Neat over-under: the young snake  
 Through an unyielding shell his path could break.  
 Singing of kettles, like a singing brook,  
 Made out-of-doors a fireside nook.

But you, my love, where had you then your station?  
 Seeing that on this counter-earth together  
 We go not distant from each other;  
 I knew you near me in that strange region,  
 So searched for you, in hope to see you stand  
 On some near olive-terrace, in the heat,  
 The left-hand glove drawn on your right hand,  
 The empty snake's egg perfect at your feet--  
 But found you nowhere in the wide land,  
 And cried disconsolately, until you spoke  
 Immediate at my elbow, and your voice broke  
 This trick of time, changing the world about  
 To once more inside-in and outside-out. (CP 108)

Interestingly, this "outside-inside" conceit is also deployed in Riding's "Opening of Eyes." Although Riding's

poem is concerned with "self-wonder," not with "deep thought" and "concentration" upon another person, as in "The Terraced Valley," both poems reveal a similar fascination with the management of spatial metaphors by the intellect.

Thought looking out on thought  
 Makes one an eye.  
 One is the mind self-blind,  
 The other is thought gone  
 To be seen from afar and not known.  
 Thus is a universe very soon.

The immense surmise swims round and round,  
 And heads grow wise  
 Of marking bigness,  
 And idiot size  
 Spaces out Nature,

And ears report echoes first,  
 Then sounds, distinguish words  
 Of which the sense comes last--  
 From mouths spring forth vocabularies  
 As if by charm.  
 And thus do false horizons claim pride  
 For distance in the head  
 The head conceives outside.

Self-wonder, rushing from the eyes,  
 Returns lesson by lesson.  
 The all, secret at first,  
 Now is the knowable,  
 The view of flesh, mind's muchness.

But what of secretness,  
 Thought not divided, thinking  
 A single whole of seeing?  
 That mind dies ever instantly  
 Of too plain sight forseen  
 Within too suddenly,  
 While mouthless lips break open  
 Mutely astonished to rehearse  
 The unutterable simple verse. (CP 95)

Both poems are unforthcoming as to precisely what "experience" triggers such thought-processes. Before he met Riding, it would be difficult to imagine Graves writing a

poem so dominated by an experience that can only be called a "mental event." A similar sense of the seductive and illusory potential of thought is hinted at in Riding's strange contention: "And thus do false horizons claim pride/  
For distance in the head/ The head conceives outside." Attempts to understand in spatial terms the more disorienting aspects of the mind can be found in several of Graves's poems, such as "Lost Acres" ("To walk there would be loss of sense"); "The Philosopher" ("the cell became/ A spacious other head/ In which the emancipated reason might/ Learn in due time to walk at greater length/ And more unanswerably"); "Interruption" ( the "[h]azed over countryside of thoughtfulness/ Far behind in the mind and above"), and "Warning to Children" ("For who dares undo the parcel/ Finds himself at once inside it"). Although Riding's example and influence most likely brought about Graves's recognition of the amazing flexibility of the mind, it must be noted that he most often acknowledges this mental pliancy only to emphasize its dangers.

"The Terraced Valley" shows Graves temporarily entertaining the elaborate orderings of the imagination with a view to dispelling the solipsistic atmosphere created by such a spurious brand of "concentration." The near-paralyzing anguish prompted by the knowledge that the mind may as readily isolate one from others as bring one closer to them is overcome only by the reaffirmation of the

presence of another person. In this case, the reassuring voice of the woman is like an act of grace--hoped for, but not guaranteed ("Your voice broke/ This trick of time"). A faith in that which lies outside of the self is not, however, a quality in Graves's work which one would quickly attribute to Riding's influence. The value placed upon "self-wonder" and the "secretness" of the "knowable" throughout her poetry leads one to conclude that she is quite indifferent to accusations of solipsism.

Inasmuch as one agrees that any unifying inner vision is by definition resistant to a fully satisfying verbal manifestation, one can sympathize with Riding's poetic efforts. Her insistence upon the necessary "inner-ness" of the "plain sight" is perhaps nowhere more convincingly argued than in "Death as Death." This poem's affinities to Graves's "Pure Death" make it doubly fascinating:

To conceive death as death  
 Is difficulty come by easily,  
 A blankness fallen among  
 Images of understanding,  
 Death like a quick cold hand  
 On the hot slow head of suicide.  
 So it is come by easily  
 For one instant. Then again furnaces  
 Roar in the ears, then again hell revolves,  
 And the elastic eye holds paradise  
 At visible length from blindness,  
 And dazedly the body echoes  
 'Like this, like this, like nothing else.'

Like nothing--a similarity  
 Without resemblance. The prophetic eye,  
 Closing upon difficulty,  
 Opens upon comparison,  
 Halving the actuality  
 As a gift too plain, for which



Gratitude has no language,  
Foresight no vision. (CP 89)

The use of paradox does not seem forced here as it does elsewhere in Riding's work. The "difficulty come by easily" can be understood as the huge emotional resistance one may have to seeing death for what it is, devoid of conventionally distracting similes. This "difficulty" emerges "easily" in that it is at times unavoidable; this sudden recognition simply "falls" upon us, unsolicited. "Blankness" is an especially suitable term because it has none of the dramatic glamour of other possible word choices like "nothingness," "abyss," or "void." The grim absurdity of our similes for death is vividly conveyed in the lines: "Then again furnaces/ Roar in the ears, then again hell revolves." Repeating the phrase "then again" deflates what is normally regarded as horrific to something almost blandly routine.

For Riding, the wholeness of the inner vision is inevitably "halved" in our attempts to render it linguistically. Nevertheless, she is determined to bear witness to this "actuality." In "Pure Death," Graves is similarly concerned with seeing death for what it is, "disenthralled" from the views of "every comfortable philosopher" and "doctor of divinity." He also regards the unmediated, "pure" realization of death as a gift ("Then we at last bethought ourselves, made shift/ And simultaneously this final gift/ Gave: each with shaking hands unlocks/ The

sinister, long, brass-bound coffin-box,/ Unwraps pure death" (CP 48). Riding and Graves are both concerned with acknowledging the gift-like nature of their visions, but they are not in agreement upon how such visions could be shared with another person. I explore the nature of Graves's varying views on the importance and effectiveness of these attempted sharings in the following chapter.

"Death as Death" shows the mind in isolation contemplating the way in which the essence of one's experience eludes one's efforts to communicate it in a manner that doesn't seriously diminish its intensity. Although "Pure Death" reveals a related dissatisfaction with the diluting "comfortableness" and "greyness" of merely philosophical opinions about death, it focuses upon a mutual, rather than an individual, recognition of death in itself. In Graves's poem, the lovers are joined in the bewilderment caused by the at once frightening and enlivening perception of death. This dual nature of bewilderment is presented with a characteristic measure of scepticism in Riding's "Though in One Time":

Though in one time  
 Occur such unlike incidents  
 As my quickening of substance  
 And yours or yours,  
 Close questioning of our prompt elements  
 Tells nothing,  
 Baffling replies the baffled shrug.  
 Yet continue the comparison of names  
 And signs, searching of eyes,  
 Hands and the blurred records.

A same bewilderment of mind  
 Marries our proximate occasions,

Yet perhaps no more tokens  
 Than a colliding of the rapt--  
 Coincidence precipitate  
 Of zealous purposes  
 That for impatience  
 Left their sealed messages behind.

Then I think these are not lame excuses,  
 I think we are not much disgraced  
 In these our second reasons,  
 In these our new credentials,  
 By which we justify encounter  
 With a bewildering accuracy. (CP 96)

As usual, the exact nature of the "encounter" is not provided. Similarly, whether the "quickenings of substance" alludes to sexual attraction, or perhaps even love, is left for the reader to decide. Despite the sceptical references to the "colliding of the rapt" and the "same bewilderment" which "marries" their "proximate occasions," the final lines of the poem do suggest that this bewilderment has an authority which is exempt from the "close questioning." As vastly different as their poetry may be, both Riding and Graves settle upon the word "bewilderment" as signifying a momentary awareness of the limitations of thought that nonetheless provokes their wonder for and acceptance of life as it is offered.

To conclude by noting that Riding's and Graves's poems are thematically linked in their bedazzled acceptance of the

world as a blessedly mysterious place may evoke a vision of hand-holding and sunset-gawking sentimentality that is clearly at variance with the tone of their works. Yet, in spite of the sceptical, mistrustful, and cautious attitudes displayed in so many of their poems, there remain glimpses in some poems of a faith in that part of our psyches which remains open to bewilderment. This bewilderment is stimulating when it inspires us to strive against the daily dwindling of resolve and to reject the stale fare of our habitual thoughts.

Nearly every proposition one makes about "both Graves and Riding" splinters into a number of qualifying statements beginning with "although" or "despite." I hope that I have managed to show that their similarities, however fragmentary, are real, and are not merely the products of interpretative wilfulness. This much is certain: Graves's ability to write a poetry of selfhood which is both dignified and sardonic improved substantially during his association with Riding. She helped him to see that an obstinate awareness of one's own waywardness must precede any self-improvement. As we shall see in the following chapter, Graves's interest in veneration and self-deprecation at the expense of solid efforts in poetic self-improvement only becomes a serious problem years after Riding's departure from Graves's life. The fact that his poetry remained so distinct from hers despite her influence

may well be the result of his reluctance to follow Riding into the hazardously solitary zone of "private wonder."

Chapter Five

"Gallant But Uncircumstantial":  
Graves's Protracted Rhetoric  
of Love and Knowledge

If I love you--as I do--  
To the very perfection  
Of perfect imperfection,  
It's that I care more for you  
Than for my feeling for you.

J. V. Cunningham, Collected Poems

One no longer loves one's knowledge enough when one has  
communicated it.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

"Our experience never gets into our blood and bones.  
It always remains outside of us. That's why we look with  
wonder at the past. And this persists even when through  
practice and through growing callousness of fibre we come to  
the point when nothing that we meet in that rapid blinking  
stumble across a flick of sunshine--which our life is--  
nothing, I say, which we run against surprises us any more."

Joseph Conrad, Chance

Those who complain that T.S. Eliot assumed the poetic voice of a sagacious geezer before he reached the age of thirty-five might correspondingly lament that Robert Graves sounded like a love-struck sophomore until he was eighty-nine.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with fashioning either a more mature or a more energetic and youthful poetic voice, provided that the poet does not succumb to mere attitudinizing. Graves himself seems to anticipate this kind of objection to his later love poetry, as he self-consciously attests in "The Face in the Mirror":

Grey haunted eyes, absent-mindedly glaring  
From wide, uneven orbits; one brow drooping  
Somewhat over the eye  
Because of a missile fragment still inhering,  
Skin deep, as a foolish record of old-world fighting.

Crookedly broken nose-- low tackling caused it;  
Cheeks, furrowed; coarse grey hair, flying frenetic;  
Forehead, wrinkled and high;  
Jowls, prominent; ears, large; jaw, pugilistic;  
Teeth, few; lips, full and ruddy; mouth, ascetic.

I pause with razor poised, scowling derision  
At the mirrored man whose beard needs my attention,  
And once more ask him why  
He still stands ready, with a boy's presumption,  
To court the queen in her high silk pavillion.

(CP 187)

Here, as in many of Graves's poems from his middle age and onwards, we confront a speaker whose deliberately anachronistic perspective upon love presents itself proudly for inspection. Yet before we come to the word "court" in what could be a medieval setting ("silk pavillion") in the final line, there is little indication that love has had



much to do with the development of this face. My point is that this poem, like too many others in the latter half of Graves's career, depends upon the reader having a knowledge of Graves's theory of the ideal Woman, namely, the White Goddess, whom he so painstakingly exhumes from mythologies as diverse as those of the Welsh, Egyptians, and Persians in his "historical grammar of poetic myth."

When I say that the poem "depends upon" a special knowledge, I am not implying that it is in any ordinary sense obscure or allusive. On the contrary, the syntax, descriptive details, and carefully shaped stanzas all contribute--as they do in many of his mythological poems--to a firm sense of both the poem's thematic autonomy and its elegant closure. Yet anyone unfamiliar with Graves's Goddess might find himself wondering whether or not the witty and direct speaker in the poem intends his "boy's presumption" to be dismissed as an idle fantasy which beguiles his grey-haired head into a faery-land of queens and regal back-drops. In order for one to view this "presumption" with approval--which is evidently how Graves would ultimately view it--one must know that, in Goddess terminology, to "court the queen" is the sacred duty of the muse poet.

Much has already been written about Graves's White Goddess and his self-proclaimed status as a muse-inspired poet. The sympathetic responses to his personal mythology

are generally of the "Graves-is-not-as-tapped-out-as-he-sounds-really" variety, as evidenced by Martin Seymour-Smith's warning that "it is easy to make fun of this"<sup>1</sup> (in reference to the "analeptic trances" Graves allegedly experienced while writing The White Goddess) and by John B. Vickery's assertion that Graves's occasional satiric tone helps him to avoid "making his myth of the White Goddess appear a product of pseudo-religiosity or of occult wish fulfillment."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine even the most open-minded admirers of Graves's poetry not feeling a twinge of embarrassment when they first come upon the following description of poetry in The White Goddess:

Poetry began in the matriarchal age, and derives its magic from the moon, not from the sun. No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: 'Kill! kill! kill!' and 'Blood! blood! blood!'<sup>3</sup>

It is passages like this that give special credence to the title of Daniel Hoffman's study of Graves, Yeats, and Muir, Barbarous Knowledge. Nevertheless, aside from Yeats, it is

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Seymour-Smith, Robert Graves: His Life and Work (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1982) 393.

<sup>2</sup>John B. Vickery, Robert Graves and The White Goddess (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1972) 55.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Graves, The White Goddess (New York: Knopf, 1958) 448.

hard to imagine a greater male love poet of the twentieth century than Graves at his best.

The kind of knowledge for which Graves is the most convincing advocate, as I have tried to show in the previous chapters, is not as dependent upon the White Goddess superstructure as some critics have suggested.<sup>4</sup> What is most fascinating about the later poems is not so much their relationship with the White Goddess mythology as how Graves uses them to internalize his certainty by denouncing impertinent rationalism and plainly insisting upon his assurance. In spite of the ever-widening vortex of personal doubts, anxieties, and ambiguities, Graves, in the Yahweh fashion of "I am that I am," declares in many of his later poems, "I know what I know" (and this most commonly translates as "I know that I love").

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<sup>4</sup>Graves's argumentation in his discussions of the goddess-as-muse is in itself rather leaky. Consider this passage from his follow-up book to The White Goddess, Mammon and the Black Goddess (London: Cassell, 1965): "Orpheus recognized and glorified the Muse; in gratitude, she lent him her own magical powers, so that he made trees dance--'trees,' in Ancient Europe, being a widely used metaphor of the poetic craft." (63) After reading pages of this sort of assertion, one gets the feeling that one could substitute 'seaweed' for 'trees' and 'New Zealand' for Europe, and one would then have a basic recipe for Gravesian mythopoetic discourse. The most disturbing side to this manifestation of Graves's thinking is that it brings to mind G. K. Chesterton's description of a person on "the edge of mental disorder" who has a maniacal need to connect "one thing with another in a map more elaborate than a maze" (G. K. Chesterton, "The Maniac" in Collected Works vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) 221.

A central problem for the reader of Graves's later poetry is deciding when the speaker's ardent certainty bolsters his argument and when it simply shouts down or wilfully ignores any possible objections. If we examine two of his very short poems, "Ecstasy of Chaos" and "Freehold," we can begin to understand the differing effects the poet's avowed assurance has upon the impact of a poem.

When the immense drugged universe explodes  
 In a cascade of unendurable colour  
 And leaves us gasping naked,  
 This is no more than ecstasy of chaos:  
 Hold fast, with both hands, to that royal love  
 Which alone, as we know certainly, restores  
 Fragmentation into true being. (CP 329)

Though love expels the ugly past  
 Restoring you this house at last--  
 This generous-hearted mind and soul  
 Reserved from alien control--  
 How can you count on living free  
 From sudden jolts of history,  
 From interceptive sigh or stare  
 That heaves you back to how-things-were  
 And makes you answerable for  
 The casualties of bygone war?  
 Yet smile your vaguest: make it clear  
 That then was then, but now is here. (CP 347)

Although one cannot quite tell whether the first four lines of "Ecstasy of Chaos" refer to some kind of disoriented post-coital state or to a particularly intense recognition of the extent of one's ignorance of what there is to know about the "universe," this difficulty is in a way less vexing than the assertion in the penultimate line that "we know certainly." Together with the natural response of "how do you know?" to any such fervent declaration one wants to ask, "And why should I believe you?" (At times one gets the

unnerving sensation that Graves operates like the type of overconfident salesperson who attempts to persuade one with the line "Take my word for it.") Even if one resists the impulse to deride this instance of Graves's boastful certainty, one is not likely to be swayed by any poem which refers to a concept like "true being" without attempting to define what such an ideal might be.

"Freehold" is also generally concerned with the restorative power of love, although unlike "Ecstasy of Chaos," emotional stability is threatened by a more explicit presence, in this case, "the ugly past." The self-assured advice offered in the final couplet of the poem reveals a healthy resolve. The exhortation to "smile your vaguest" is particularly clever: it implies that no good will come of reviewing the ugliness of the past in the stultifying detail in which the mind may be prone to revel miserably. Yet the closing couplet does not so much provide a rational argument showing the addressee a way to "count on living free/ From sudden jolts of history" as it simply rejects the "jolts" by refusing to be unsettled by them. If one is persuaded by the poem, it is by virtue of a position that is anchored by the speaker's sheer conviction, the force of which is strengthened by the final couplet's punctuated caesuras which differ so solidly from the poem's previously uninterrupted flow.

Before continuing the discussion of the various manifestations of Graves's poetic certitude, I would like to make a brief detour into a side of his poetry which I first approached in Chapter Two. The wonderful lightness of touch and charming detachment which Graves achieves in such poems as "Love Without Hope," "Henry and Mary," and "One Hard Look" is also found in some of his later poems, yet one senses that even the slightest of the later poems about love has an undercurrent of melodramatic seriousness which mars its tone.

The moral character of the speakers in many of Graves's poems is often assumed, rather than exemplified; thus we find frequent references--especially in the later poems--to oaths, vows, pledges and compacts which one can only assess adequately if one has enough proof that the speakers are neither self-deluded nor insincere. Consider the late poem, "The Impossible":

Dear love, since the impossible proves  
Our sole recourse from this distress,  
Claim it: the ebony ritual mask of no  
Cannot outstare a living yes.

Claim it without despond or hate  
Or greed; but in your gentler tone  
Say: 'This is ours, the impossible,' and silence  
Will give consent it is ours alone.

The impossible has wild-cat claws  
Which you would rather meet and die  
Than commit to time's curative venom  
And break our oath; for so would I. (CP 315)

The poem has admirable directness (the unequivocal prompting to "claim it") and attests to mutual bravery ("which you

would rather meet and die".... "for so would I") which one might be able to tolerate were it not for the glaring absence of any hint of why one should trust these lovers to be so noble. This and all too many of Graves's later poems make extremely strong claims in a very rash manner (e.g. "We are poets/ Age-old in love," "Gorgon Mask" CP 547; "We ask for nothing: we have all," "Strangeness" CP 353; "none alive shall view again/ The match of you and me," "The Far Side of Your Moon" CP 321; "You live for her who alone loves you," "The Vow" CP 310). The only defense one can offer for such braggadocio is that Graves dares as few others would to show that love involves compulsions to make promises that far exceed our normal capacities.

On one level, arguing for a speaker's credibility in a poem would seem to be wasting one's time; after all, isn't poetry a medium in which what is said--and how the saying is done--supposedly overrides considerations of the speaker's unestablishable (because ultimately fictional) integrity? One of the first questions that one may ask, whether implicitly or explicitly, when involved in everyday discourse is of a dual nature: "Is the speaker serious, and if so, should he or she be taken seriously?" Since several of Graves's love poems appear rather playful and even flippant at first glance, it may help to consider whether poems such as "In Perspective" and "Dew-drop and Diamond" function in the manner outlined in a letter offering a

miniature apology for love poetry written by the Renaissance poet, George Chapman:

He that shuns trifles must shun the world; out of whose reverend heaps of substance and austerity, I can, and will, ere long, single or tumble out as brainless and passionate fooleries as ever panted in the bosom of the most ridiculous lover. Accept it therefore (good Madam) though as a trifle, yet as a serious argument of my affection.<sup>5</sup>

The reader may hesitate before deciding whether the following poems are more like "passionate fooleries" or "serious arguments" (or yet something else):

What, keep love in perspective? --that old lie  
Forced on Imagination by the Eye  
Which, mechanistically controlled, will tell  
How rarely table-sides run parallel;  
How distance shortens us; how wheels are found  
Oval in shape far oftener than round;  
How every ceiling-corner's out of joint;  
How the broad highway tapers to a point--  
Can all this fool us lovers? Not for long:  
Even the blind will sense that something's wrong.  
(CP 338)

The difference between you and her  
(Whom I to you did once prefer)  
Is clear enough to settle:  
She like a diamond shone, but you  
Shine like an early drop of dew  
Poised on a red rose petal.

The dew-drop carries in its eye  
Mountain and forest, sea and sky,  
With every change of weather;  
Contrariwise, a diamond splits  
The prospect into idle bits  
That none can piece together. (CP 360)

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George Chapman, letter "To the Lady Walsingham," The Poems of George Chapman, ed. Phyllis Brooks Bartlett (New York: Modern Library, 1941) 132.



Both of these poems are quite clearly "trifles," yet one need not conclude that their lightness in tone entirely precludes an undercurrent of seriousness. They do, however, reside in the ever-disputed emotional territory where the literary craftsman collides with the romantic lover. The second poem at least engages a potentially serious question of preference, even though its dewdrop/diamond analogy would not sustain a particularly searching analysis. One may have more trouble deciding if "In Perspective" is more of an exercise in literary cleverness than it is a lively rebuke of the dreary rationalism best suited to wet afternoons. Although the descriptions of the eye's misperceptions are nicely drawn, the confidence of the lovers is not described in any detail at all. The speaker has thus placed himself in the safe and not very persuasive position of trusting to the unelaborated wisdom of love to "sense that something's wrong."

I cite these two poems as "trifles" which may constitute "serious arguments of affection," not in order to accord them guarded praise, but rather to give a small illustration of a quality which inheres in much of Graves's poetry. In fact, in all too many cases, Graves's witty certitude turns into mere mannerism, surfacing in lines like: "Must we not rage alone together/ In lofts of singular high starriness?" ("Stolen Jewel" CP 330) or, "Ours is no undulant fierce rutting fever" ("Virgin Mirror" CP 401).

At some point, one is bound to ask whether the speaker of these poems is taking a stand or striking a pose.

In a poem which could very well be addressed to Graves, entitled "In Due Form," Laura Riding explores the problem facing the lover who insists upon the sincerity of his feelings.

I do not doubt you.  
 I know you love me.  
 It is a fact of your indoor face.  
 A true fancy of your muscularity.  
 Your step is confident.  
 Your look is thorough.  
 Your stay-beside-me is a pillow  
 To roll over on  
 And sleep as on my own upon.

But make me a statement  
 In due form on endless foolscap  
 Witnessed before a notary  
 And sent by post, registered,  
 To be signed for on receipt  
 And opened under oath to believe;  
 An antique paper missing from my strong-box.  
 A bond to clutch when hail tortures the chimney  
 And lightning circles redder round the city,  
 And your brisk step and thorough look  
 Are gallant but uncircumstantial,  
 And not mentionable in a doom-book.<sup>6</sup>

Opening with a terseness and abruptness suited to direct sentiment, the first stanza sets the stage for the qualifying considerations of the second. The physical evidence of certainty presented in the beginning is judged in a broader manner in the lines "And your brisk step and thorough look/ Are gallant but uncircumstantial."

Regardless of the many positive connotations of "gallant" as

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<sup>6</sup>Laura Riding, Collected Poems of Laura (Riding) Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980) 130.

bold, daring, and spirited, the "but uncircumstantial" seems to deflate the word in much the same way as would a left-handed compliment like "brilliant but careless." I say "seems" because, given Riding's idiosyncratic interest in that which is "not mentionable," and also given the possible wrenching of ordinary usage which would have one wonder if "unccircumstantial" might mean "beyond and above mere circumstance," it is (slimly) possible that the poet regrets that the true nature of the gallant confidence cannot be adequately recorded by a "statement/In due form."

Discovering when Graves's gallant certainty has substantial weight behind it becomes especially important when his poems make stark assertions and exhortations. Whereas one of the truly liberating features of poems from Graves's rich middle period is their drive toward decisiveness in the midst of anxiety-sodden considerations, it is this very decisiveness that imperils so many of Graves's later poems. "Whole Love" is representative of this tendency in his later verse:

Every choice is always the wrong choice,  
 Every vote cast is always cast away--  
 How can truth hover between alternatives?

Then love me more than dearly, love me wholly,  
 Love me with no weighing of circumstance,  
 As I am pledged in honour to love you:

With no weakness, with no speculation  
 On what might happen should you and I prove less  
 Than bringers-to-be of our own certainty.  
 Neither was born by hazard: each foreknew  
 The extreme possession we are grown into. (CP 313)

The debilitating feeling that all decisions are infiltrated by errors of judgement is succinctly presented in the opening stanza. The second stanza, however, rather than attempting to ponder how truth might "hover between alternatives," proceeds by assuming in the space between stanzas that " [It can't, so] Then love me more than dearly." The next lines move swiftly from the exhortation to "love me with no weighing of circumstance"--which could be taken as something of a desperate plea--to the ardent petitioning of "As I am pledged in honour to love you," and the poem concludes with an assertion of some unspecified kind of prescience: "each foreknew/ The extreme possession we are grown into." As gallant as an avowal to love "wholly" may be, the speaker seems more inclined to brow-beat his partner into consent than to persuade her.

The aggressive urgency of a poem like "Whole Love" would not be especially noteworthy were it not indicative of an emotional movement found in much of Graves's later verse. Somewhat in the vein of Shakespeare's Henry V who mistrusts "fellows of infinite tongue, that can rhyme themselves into ladies' favours [and then] do always reason themselves out again,"<sup>7</sup> Graves disdains the type of sophistry which gorgeously rationalizes any fluctuation of the affections, no matter how irresponsible the fluctuation may be.

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<sup>7</sup>William Shakespeare, Henry V, V, ii, 155-57, The Riverside Shakespeare (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1974) 969.

Steadfastness and self-assurance are amply valued by Graves throughout his poetry, but at times these qualities seem to step in before any serious challenges are fully considered. Whereas in poems such as "Sick Love" and "Pure Death" one can sympathize with the reservations and terrors which make decisions both more frightening and therefore more painful, one cannot as readily sympathize with what appear to be foregone conclusions in many of the later poems.

A less negative way of viewing the strident certainty found in many of Graves's poems is to see it as an attempt at expressing intuitive understanding and the ways in which we act directly upon this kind of understanding. The distinction between intuition and belief is always a difficult one to make, and it is quite understandable that a few critics, most notably Hoffman and Kirkham, have argued that the struggle throughout much of his poetry is a more or less religious one in that Graves seeks an affirmation beyond anything that is procurable by reason. His sonnet "History of the Word," first published in the 1930 collection Ten Poems More and only republished in the 1938 Collected Poems, is an early example of his concern that what one believes most deeply is in danger of a bland diminution if one forgets its initial significance:

The Word that in the beginning was the Word  
 For two or three, but elsewhere spoke unheard,  
 Found Words to interpret it, which for a season  
 Prevailed until ruled out by Law and Reason  
 Which, by a lax interpretation cursed,  
 In Laws and Reasons logically dispersed;

These, in their turn, found they could do no better  
 Than fall to Letters and each claim a letter.  
 In the beginning then, the Word alone,  
 But now the various tongue-tied Lexicon  
 In perfect impotence the day nearing  
 When every ear shall lose its sense of hearing  
 And every mind by knowledge be close-shuttered--  
 But two or three, that hear the word uttered.  
 (CP 1938 141)

Since the tone plunges from the high seriousness of John's gospel paraphrased in the opening line to the rather casual "For two or three" of the second line, one might initially expect the religious impulse to be a target for satiric treatment. However, the next few lines show that the brunt of the attack is to be borne by "Words," "lax interpretation," and finally, "knowledge." As I have argued in earlier chapters, Graves often opposes a type of invigorating, active knowing to what he judges to be mere second- or third-hand information which may hinder one from seeking truly valuable and inspiring understanding of the world. Yet rarely has he developed his argument within a potentially fundamentalist religious context. Graves's revisions of the poem for the 1938 collection are especially helpful in deflecting some of the force with which a sceptic might try to oppose the presumably orthodox authority attributed to the "Word" in the poem. The two most significant changes occur in lines five and thirteen: in the 1930 version they read, "Which, by interpretation's freedom cursed"; "And every mind by deafness be close shuttered." Graves rescues line five from accusations of narrow-minded

authoritarianism by showing that it is not the freedom itself he opposes as much as it is the interpretative laxity into which this freedom may too easily degenerate. The replacement of "deafness" with "knowledge" also distances the gist of the poem somewhat from the more conventional Biblical metaphors which refer to those who have eyes yet cannot see and those who have ears yet cannot hear. In making this particular change, he can also refer back to the "Laws and Reasons," which unfortunately constitute knowledge which is more likely to clutter and block our original sense of inspiration than to reinforce it.

Much as one might admire the urbane tracing of interpretative collapse in "History of the Word," one is nonetheless left without any explanation of the nature of the "Word" for the "two or three" who are perceptive or lucky enough to hear it "uttered." This significant lack of elaboration becomes an even more important strategy in Graves's later poetry in which the "Word" is synonymous with love. "Strategy" may seem to imply that Graves has a self-protective and manipulative detachment; I refer to it as a strategy because I suspect that although there are times when the word "love" is wisely made to carry unequivocal conviction, there are other times when the lack of definition provides an escape route from weak reasoning or emotional deadlock. This strategy can be seen at its lamest in a passage like the following from "The Traditionalist":

If miracles are recorded in his presence  
 As in your own, remember  
 These are no more than time's obliquities  
 Gifted to men who still fall deep in love  
 With real women like you. (CP 490)

Placing such supreme value upon his own quasi-religious celebration of romantic love, Graves practically writes himself into a corner, and it is a space which has room only for a two-seater pew. The love between a man and a woman becomes frustratingly unearthly; it becomes, in Stevie Smith's wonderful phrase regarding certain ecclesiastical behavior, "kicked upstairs to become a mystery." The speaker's love in some of the later poems is imagined to reside in an inviolate psychic domain:

Fast bound together by the impossible,  
 The everlasting, the contempt for change,  
 We meet seldom, we kiss seldom, seldom converse,  
 Sharing no pillow in no dark bed,  
 Knowing ourselves twin poets, man with woman,  
 A millennial coincidence past all argument,  
 All laughter and all wonder. (CP 526)

Further evidence that Graves does not shrink from a religious vision of romantic love can be seen in these comments from his introduction to the poems of St. John of the Cross: "the consummation and the continuance of man-woman love on the divine level can be so bedevilled by practical circumstance that the duende ["divine presence"] seldom reappears after the lovers' first few encounters."<sup>8</sup> It is this idea of "continuance" which troubles so much of

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<sup>8</sup>Robert Graves, intro. to Poems of St. John of the Cross, trans. J.F. Simms (New York: Grove, 1968) vi.



Graves's love poetry. Added to the problem of knowing for sure that one is truly in love is the problem of sustaining this love "everlastingly."

Ultimately, Graves's certainty in a "divine level" of love deadens much of his poetry because it diminishes the lively interest in the "practical circumstance" which gives an empirical grounding, as well as a casual warmth, to his most successful poems. It is as though the felicitous outcroppings of detail in the earlier poems are not given any chance to occur in the later ones. Consider, for instance, how the curled-lip nastiness at the end of "Wm. Brazier" (CP 70) is offset by Graves's indication of the children's quiet delight in the street's "crookedness, when the other streets were straight," and by the sprightly caricaturist-like description of the chimney-sweep: "He had black hands/ Black face, black clothes, black brushes and white teeth;/ He jingled round the town in a pony-trap/ And the pony's name was Soot, and Soot was black." It is understandable enough to desire to escape from all of the leaden and boring constraints which we deem to be "practical circumstance," but it is quite another thing to convince oneself that all circumstance is mere hindrance to the continuance of "love on the divine level." We have already seen that even though Graves was never fond of indulging in elaborate descriptions of the beloved, or even of offering very many isolated but sharp details (like Hardy), there was

usually a definite sense of the physical presence of the people in the poems (e.g., we find the lovers sharing the bed in "Counting the Beats," and the speaker of "The Nape of the Neck" conflates physical closeness with emotional intimacy). Yet the concentration upon the spiritual nature of love in so many of the later poems effects a thinning out of the distinguishing character traits which might have inspired the poet's attention. In order to emphasize the type of rendering which, although never abundant in Graves's verse, all but evaporates from his later work, one might compare almost any of his later poems with these passages from Louis MacNeice's Autumn Journal:

So I am glad  
 That life contains her with all her moods and moments  
 More shifting and more transient than I had  
 Yet thought of as being integral to beauty;  
 Whose eyes are candour,  
 And assurance in her feet  
 Like a homing pigeon never by doubt diverted.

Off-hand, at times hysterical, abrupt,  
You are the one I always shall remember,  
 Whom cant can never corrupt  
 Nor argument disinherit.  
 Frivolous, always in a hurry, forgetting the address,  
 Frowning too often, taking enormous notice  
 Of hats and backchat--how could I assess  
 The thing that makes you different?<sup>9</sup>

One can see why the poet is glad, and the gladness is all the more convincing because we are given the sense that the woman is to him an individual, one whose charms and faults are not really separable into discrete properties. MacNeice

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<sup>9</sup>Louis MacNeice, "Autumn Journal," Selected Poems, ed. Michael Longley (London: Faber, 1988) 48-49.

knows that it is possible to be both captivated and annoyed by her "taking enormous notice/ Of hats and backchat": what could be labelled as oversensitivity can also be viewed as an alert attention to potentially significant details.

Although much of Graves's later poetry may be lacking in distinctive this-worldly details, it is unfair to conclude from this that the more ethereal the love to which he refers becomes, the less plausible this love must seem to the reader. Graves has always viewed love as a potentially evanescent state that transcends mere compatibility or fellow-feeling; yet it is not until later in his career--beginning in the 'fifties--that he imagines himself to have the ability to invoke this sense of spiritual communion which he considers to be the essence of love. For instance, both the poem "Full Moon" and the much later poem "In Trance at a Distance" present lovers as being dependent upon a knowledge which verges on the supernatural. Yet the earlier poem is ultimately more satisfying because, among other things, it at least accepts the fact that love which thrives solely upon an unexplainable spiritual attraction is likely to die as inexplicably as it was born:

As I walked out that sultry night,  
 I heard the stroke of One.  
 The moon, attained to her full height,  
 Stood beaming like the sun:  
 She exorcized the ghostly wheat  
 To mute assent in love's defeat,  
 Whose tryst had now begun.

The fields lay sick beneath my tread,  
 A tedious owlet cried,

A nightingale above my head  
 With this or that replied--  
 Like man and wife who nightly keep  
 Inconsequent debate in sleep  
 As they dream side by side.

Your phantom wore the moon's cold mask,  
 My phantom wore the same;  
 Forgetful of the feverish task  
 In hope of which they came,  
 Each image held the other's eyes  
 And watched a grey distraction rise  
 To cloud the eager flame--

To cloud the eager flame of love,  
 To fog the shining gate;  
 They held the tyrannous queen above  
 Sole mover of their fate,  
 They glared as marble statues glare  
 Across the tessellated stair  
 Or down the halls of state.

And now warm earth was Arctic sea,  
 Each breath came dagger-keen;  
 Two bergs of glinting ice were we,  
 The broad moon sailed between;  
 There swam the mermaids, tailed and finned,  
 And love went by upon the wind  
 As though it had not been. (CP 47)

It is easy, often, and natural even,  
 To commune with her in trance at a distance;  
 To attest those deep confessional sighs  
 Otherwise so seldom heard from her;  
 To be assured by a single shudder  
 Wracking both hearts, and underneath the press  
 Of clothes by a common nakedness.

Hold fast to the memory, lest a cold fear  
 Of never again here, of nothing good coming,  
 Should lure you into self-delusive trade  
 With demonesses who dare masquerade  
 As herself in your dreams, and who after a while  
 Skilfully imitate her dancing gait,  
 Borrow her voice and vocables and smile.

Is it no longer--was it ever?--in your power  
 To catch her close to you at any hour:  
 She has raised a wall of nothingness in between  
 (Were it something known and seen, to be torn apart,

You could grind its heartless fragments into the  
 ground);  
 Yet, taken in trance, would she still deny  
 That you are hers, she yours, till both shall die?  
 (CP 237)

Whereas "Full Moon" gains strength from its shimmeringly stylised atmosphere which intrigues us with its artifice, "In Trance at a Distance" loses its impact by its attempt to make the extraordinary a bit too familiar ("It is easy, often, and natural even"). The blending of the conventions of romantic ballads with a strangely wistful realism in "Full Moon"--perhaps reminiscent of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner"--enables Graves to enhance the apprehensive mood of the poem even though we are told of "love's defeat" in the opening lines. The almost fairy-tale-like use of "ghostly" in the first stanza takes on a portentous feeling when we come to the second stanza's more psychologically resonant adjective "tedious." Moreover, the witheringly matter-of-fact polysyllabic "inconsequent" stands out even more boldly after the somewhat stagey spookiness of the first stanza. The brilliance of "Full Moon" lies in its portrayal of lovers who recognize that their love has somehow faded into inconsequence, yet who also find that this knowledge cannot completely extinguish the "hope" that they are mistaken about the failure of their love. The final observation that "love went by upon the wind/ As though it had not been" shows that Graves has no interest in mocking the mysteriousness of love by tacking on

any tritely consoling thoughts about it having been better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

Even though the desperation to regain the sense of communion expressed by the speaker of "In Trance at a Distance" reveals an effort beyond making a "tryst" and then accepting that the "tyrannous Queen above" is "sole mover" of one's fate, the solution to this desperation seems to be won far too easily. Admittedly, the poem does end with a question, but it is difficult to see it as anything but a rhetorical one. The ending is especially disappointing because Graves has so vividly rendered the violent frustration which afflicts the person who senses that an unidentifiable barrier has been formed by his beloved: "She has raised a wall of nothingness in between/ (Were it something known and seen, to be torn apart/ You could grind its heartless fragments into the ground)". The speaker's thinly-veiled certainty that, divested of her guardedness and "taken in trance," she will not deny their bond is representative of a type of unassailable spiritual authority that Graves appeals to more often than most readers are likely to find justifiable.

It is nearly impossible to refer to the relationship between spiritual love and authority in Graves's poetry without discussing that enigmatic dispenser of cosmic amorousness, the White Goddess. One fears that the kind of celestial authority which resides in Graves's goddess too

readily fits his individual needs. Fabulously designed as the best of his poems in honor of the goddess may be, they seem to be devices for protracting an idea of love rather than for understanding or maintaining a real love relationship. The essential problem with just about any unquestioned authority, as can be seen in "The White Goddess," is the one-sidedness of the commanding power:

All saints revile her, and all sober men  
 Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean--  
 In scorn of which we sailed to find her  
 In distant regions likeliest to hold her  
 Whom we desired above all things to know,  
 Sister of the mirage and echo.

It was a virtue not to stay,  
 To go our headstrong and heroic way  
 Seeking her out at the volcano's head,  
 Among pack ice, or where the track had faded  
 Beyond the cavern of the seven sleepers:  
 Whose broad high brow was white as any leper's,  
 Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips,  
 With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips.

Green sap of Spring in the young wood a-stir  
 Will celebrate the Mountain Mother,  
 And every song-bird shout awhile for her;  
 But we are gifted, even in November  
 Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense  
 Of her nakedly worn magnificence  
 We forget cruelty and past betrayal,  
 Heedless of where the next bright bolt will fall.

(CP 157)

The self-conscious heroic endurance, the open-heartedness, and foremost, the rapture which sustains the men and permits them to "forget cruelty and past betrayal" would be more admirable if one didn't suspect that the goddess herself need not ever be bothered developing these qualities nor allow herself to be susceptible to "magnificence." The

implied capriciousness of the goddess's bright bolts is seen as a divine impersonality rather than as a selfish disregard of others.<sup>10</sup>

The goddess often operates as something of a dea ex machina, wheeled in to excuse or rationalize almost anything that might be considered to be a moral shortcoming in a mere mortal. At times Graves seems to believe that a visitation by this divinity truly exculpates a woman from any blameworthiness for her harsh treatment of her lover. "In Her Praise" is one of the most explicit celebrations of the immunity granted by the Goddess:

This they know well: the Goddess yet abides.  
 Though each new lovely woman whom she rides,  
 Straddling her neck a year or two or three,  
 Should sink beneath such weight of majesty  
 And, groping back to humankind, gainsay  
 The headlong power that whitened all her way  
 With a broad track of trefoil--leaving you,  
 Her chosen lover, ever again thrust through  
 With daggers, your purse rifled, your rings gone--  
 Nevertheless they call you to live on  
 To parley with the pure, oracular dead,  
 To hear the wild pack whimpering overhead,  
 To watch the moon tugging at her cold tides.  
 Woman is mortal woman. She abides. (CP 238)

The crux of Graves's goddess-ridden conception of love is clear enough in this poem: rather than acknowledge the

<sup>10</sup>One should remember, however, that Graves is in the business here of venerating a particular quality of the majestic Ur-woman, no common mortal, and so he is willing to forgive her terrestrial shortcomings. As Thomas Hardy wryly acknowledged of his glamorously tragic heroine, Eustasia Vye: "She had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a model woman." The Return of the Native (London: Macmillan, 1958) 73.



shattering possibility that a man's mistreatment in a relationship could be due to the woman's selfishness or indifference, Graves safeguards himself against disillusion in love by conceiving of "real" love as so powerful that it is inevitably cruel. Reading Graves's later poetry one sometimes wonders if the poet would be spared some grief if he spent more time conversing with his beloved than communing with her in his need to feel that--as phrased in "The Winged Heart"--"Your certitude must be my certitude" (CP 236).

The greatest danger that Graves courts in his struggle to achieve absolute certainty in love is much like that of the type of religious person who claims simultaneously to seek and to know the truth. One can lapse into an unthinking devotion to this truth, which, of course, is in some measure the value of devotion in that it denotes a fundamental commitment to an idea despite any objections. However, the most insidious drawback to this kind of devotion is that it is all too easy to claim to be devoted and subsequently to lose sight of the object of one's devotion by merely going through the motions of belief. Therefore, anything suffered for or done in the service of the Goddess is theoretically beyond reproach (e.g., "Love and Night": "Who could have guessed that your unearthly glow/ Conceals a power no judgement can subdue,/ No act of God, nor death?" CP 405).

However, as tempting as it may be to deride Graves's gallant tributes to an ideal woman who seems at times insubstantial, this temptation ought to be resisted when one is given an opportunity to see who is being venerated. "Seeing" should be distinguished from "getting a look," which is all one gets in a poem like "Rhea," where the ancient glamour of a goddess is merely spruced-up from a blandly voyeuristic perspective: "discrete she lies,/ Not dead but entranced, dreamlessly,/ With slow breathing, her lips curved/ In a smile half-archaic, her breast bare,/ Hair astream" (CP 183). In the following stanzas from "The Great-Grandmother," one finds Graves paying homage to a person rather than to a mythic idol:

That aged woman with the bass voice  
 And yellowing white hair: believe her.  
 Though to your grandfather, her son, she lied  
 And to your father disingenuously  
 Told half the tale as the whole,  
 Yet she was honest with herself,  
 Knew disclosure was not yet due,  
 Knows it is due now.

Confessions of old distaste  
 For music, sighs and roses--  
 Their false-innocence assaulting her,  
 Breaching her hard heart;  
 Of the pleasures of a full purse,  
 Of clean brass and clean linen,  
 Of being alone at last;  
 Disgust with the ailing poor  
 To whom she was bountiful;  
 How the prattle of young children  
 Vexed more than if they whined;  
 How she preferred cats.

She will say, yes, she acted well,  
 Took such pride in the art  
 That none of them suspected, even,  
 Her wrathful irony

In doing what they asked  
 Better than they could ask it....  
 But, ah, how grudgingly her will returned  
 After the severance of each navel-cord,  
 And fled how far again,  
 When again she was kind! (CP 115-116)

In much the same way as Graves praised the heroine of Alice in Wonderland for her "uncommon sense" (CP 32), the great grandmother is unequivocally admired for qualities which are in no way flamboyant. In fact, her quiet industriousness, her generosity and her discretion are all shown to be mingled with her less than noble irritableness. Similarly, her "hard heart," "disgust," and "wrathful irony" are not cancelled-out by her charitableness; rather, they exist together with it, and perhaps make it more believable, since it is not presented as an all-cleansing quality. By insisting that we "believe her" (and in the final stanza "hear her"), Graves implies that her words have value because they are in accord with her experience, and this insistence also indicates that such "disclosure" is rare in a world where so many people are, as stated in the final stanza, "drifting/ On tides of fancy."

The soberly approving eye that one finds in several of Graves's poems makes the worshipping gaze of the goddess poems all the more unsettling. The witty self-deprecating tone of "Any Honest Housewife," for instance, where the housewife is appreciated for her consummate attentiveness, concludes with two questions in which the women's second nature is marvelled at but not mystified: "Does this [her

sorting out of the "sound" and the "rotten"] denote a sixth peculiar sense/ Gifted to housewives for their vestal needs?/ Or is it the failure of the usual five/ In all unthrifty writers on this head?" (CP 89). However, the double-edged humour of a poem like "A Slice of Wedding Cake" where Graves asks with lively exasperation, "Why have such scores of lovely, gifted girls/ Married such impossible men?" (CP 192) becomes a mere smug smile at man's expense in "Above the Edge of Doom":

Bats at play taunt us with 'guess how many'  
 And music sounds far off, tempered by sea.  
 Above the edge of doom sits woman  
 Communing with herself. 'Dear Love,' says she,  
 As it were apostrophizing cat or dog,  
 'Sometimes by a delicate glance and gesture  
 You almost seem to understand me,  
 Poor honest creature of the blue eyes,  
 Having crept closer to my sealed bosom  
 With your more desperate faith in womankind  
 Than any other since I first flowered.

It may be best you cannot read my mind.' (CP 301)

Even if one doesn't find the "desperate faith in womankind" to be slightly mocked by the suggestion that the man's understanding of the woman is on a par with that of a small furry animal, the genuflection to the woman's "sealed bosom" is far too self-abasing to gain our sympathy. One can't help suspecting that this poem, like too many others written in the latter half of Graves's career, is simply an instance

where the poet is dusting and polishing the Goddess's pedestal, killing time between epiphanies.<sup>11</sup>

When the powerful love for women which Graves so often describes in his poetry is fed by either the explicit or implicit "desperate faith in womankind," the poems are rarely very moving. One need not be a feminist to see that Graves is not doing any woman much service in the long run by deifying her and thus elevating her out of the world of common risks and challenges. It could be argued that Graves views the woman-as-goddess as entrusted with the most exalted duties in the world as a mother and as vessel of intuitive wisdom. However, no matter how much Graves considers women to be superior to the bumbling technological world he himself so despises, it is chauvinistic and morally

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<sup>11</sup>In the brief but perceptive essay, "The Love Vision of Robert Graves," Quest 48 (1966) co-authors Ranchon and Razdan argue that "Graves's man, the passive counterpart in the love-ritual does not fare well in terms of imagery, and in this, perhaps, lies part of the reason for his lack-lustre personality." (20) They also refer to the "humorous rendering of the relationship between the Lilliputian man and the demonic woman." (18) Strangely--and refreshingly--the essay makes no reference to the White Goddess and judges Graves's "unique" but "subjective" later love poetry on its own merits and shortcomings. The most interesting point made is that "thematically Graves aligns himself with the visionaries whereas the tone he adopts for externalizing the truths of the imagination, blood and intellect is derived from the different, sophisticated classical tradition" (21).

backward of him to portray women as somehow existing aloof from material progress or regress.<sup>12</sup>

Another reason why Graves's "desperate faith in womankind" is seldom very convincing has to do with the unmonitored pride of the speakers in some of his later poems. In the most extreme cases, it is difficult to decide if the speaker's magniloquent certainty in love renders the poem more ludicrous or more boring: "Having at last perfected/ Utter togetherness/ We meet nightly in dream" ("The Crab Tree" CP 465); "You, from your queendom, answerable only/ To royal virtue, not to a male code,/ Knew me for supernatural, like yourself" ("Powers Unconfessed" CP 410). The later poems, nearly all of which are in some manner about this life-giving passionate certainty in love, are rarely interesting in themselves, and one should be careful not to be too taken with them as a body of "intriguing" work written by a gifted poet. Nevertheless, I do believe that the unquestioned pride in the later poems

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<sup>12</sup>See his essay "Real Women," in which he expatiates with good-humoured and condescending aplomb about how "it is easier to be a real woman in backwaters of Christianity or Islam or Hinduism, where codes of behaviour have not changed for centuries" (105), and about the Zen-like "is-ness" of women: "Man's biological function is to do; woman's is to be" (110). Graves also lets us know that a real woman "cook[s] by instinct" and "if she paints or writes, this will be for her own private amusement, not to satisfy ambition; and if forced to earn her livelihood in this way, she repudiates the public personage forced on her by dealers and critics." (111). It should surprise no one that this essay, reprinted in Mammon and The Black Goddess, originally appeared in a 1964 issue of Ladies' Home Journal.

does enable one to see much more distinctly how astonishingly adept Graves can be at characterizing and deflating the kind of pride that is born of weakness and insecurity. If we examine "The Suicide in the Copse" and "To Evoke Posterity," we can remind ourselves of the wry levelheadedness which is so grievously absent from his later poetry:

The suicide, far from content,  
Stared down at his own shattered skull:  
Was this what he meant?

Had not his purpose been  
To liberate himself from duns and dolts  
By a change of scene?

From somewhere came a roll of laughter:  
He had looked so on his wedding-day,  
And the day after.

There was nowhere at all to go,  
And no diversion now but to peruse  
What literature the winds might blow

Into the copse where his body lay:  
A year-old sheet of sporting news,  
A crumpled schoolboy essay. (CP 128)

To evoke posterity  
Is to weep on your own grave,  
Ventriloquizing for the unborn:  
'Would you were present in flesh, hero!  
What wreaths and junketings!'

And the punishment is fixed:  
To be found fully ancestral,  
To be cast in bronze for a city square,  
To dribble green in times of rain  
And stain the pedestal.

Spiders in the spread beard;  
A life proverbial  
On clergy lips a-cackle;  
Eponymous institutes,  
Their luckless architecture.

Two more dates of life and birth  
 For the hour of special study  
 From which all boys and girls of mettle  
 Twice a week play truant  
 And worn excuses try.

Alive, you have abhorred  
 The crowds on holiday  
 Jostling and whistling--yet would you air  
 Your death-mask, smoothly lidded,  
 Along the promenade? (CP 88)

The second stanza of "The Suicide in the Copse" pinpoints the haughty reductiveness of the malcontent's desire to "liberate himself from duns and dolts." By wilfully ignoring everyone else's sensitivity and intelligence, the suicidal man can thereby attempt to justify his inclination. The feelings of humiliation and disappointment which permeate the man's unacknowledged insecure state are eerily conveyed by the "roll of laughter" and by the hint of unfulfillment accompanying the time of his wedding. Leading him to forfeit all hopes, the suicide's inverted pride obliterates all possibilities: "There was nowhere at all to go." As inconsequential as "a year-old sheet of sporting news" and as irreverently cast off and forgotten as a "crumpled schoolboy essay," the suicide finds his ironical liberation. The "crumpled schoolboy essay" has the resonating power of a symbolist image: life, for the suicide, is like an assignment into which he may have put great effort, but one in which he cannot find, or refuses to see, any lasting purpose.



"To Evoke Posterity" reveals the absurdity of vying for the glassy-eyed respect of those whom one disdains. To give vivid force to the adage that one should be careful of what one asks for because one might get it, Graves catalogues the paltry commemoration given to posthumous respectability: "To be cast in bronze for a city square/ To dribble green in times of rain"... "A life proverbial/ On clergy lips a-cackle."

Although "To Evoke Posterity" is essentially negative in its approach, there is a characteristic hint of the positive Gravesian attitude in the reference to "all boys and girls of mettle" who "play truant." Graves approves of those who know themselves well enough to trust their instincts when they are at odds with rules and stagnant rituals. Regrettably, the non-conformist verve of Graves's poetry of the late twenties and thirties becomes enfeebled in much of his later work by the grand gestures of scorn toward those subject to "God Apollo's golden mean" (CP 157). One wishes that there were more poems like "Between Hyssop and Axe," one of the rare examples from Graves's later poetry where the spirited and proud independence which he comes to rate so highly is tempered with the ironic reserve of his best earlier work:

To know our destiny is to know the horror  
 Of separation, dawn oppressed by night:  
 Is, between hyssop and axe, boldly to prove  
 That gifted, each, with singular need for freedom  
 And, haunted, both, by spectres of reproach,  
 We may yet house together without succumbing

To the low fever of domesticity  
 Or to the lunatic spin of aimless flight. (CP 307)

The poem begins with the lofty agonizing certainty which one finds very tiring in the later love poetry. Yet in this case, the knowing of their destiny does not lift the lovers out of the realm of "practical circumstance"; rather, it prompts them to acknowledge the challenge presented by their temperaments and the nature of their attraction. The precariousness of the ever-complicated endeavour to "house together" is brought to the fore by contrasting the equally threatening possibilities of "domesticity" and "aimless flight." "Low fever" succinctly connotes the contagious dulled sensitivity that so easily displaces the intimacy which ought to be nourished by living together.

The trenchant awareness which reminds one that dawn will always be potentially "oppressed by night" is an awareness that attenuates to a formulaic foreboding in many of the White Goddess poems. "Between Hyssop and Axe" is a welcome exception to the predictable cycle of apprehensive courtship, passionate union, and "fated" inconstancy presided over by the triple-goddess of love. The knowing of their destiny in this poem promotes the need for renewed efforts; it doesn't constitute a wise aerial perspective from which the lovers can pout regretfully.

And it is ultimately this would-be all-inclusive White Goddess pattern which contributes to the deterioration of Graves's later verse. Even when he attempts to extend his

poetic mythology to include the more benign "Black Goddess" of wisdom, one senses that Graves has retreated somewhat from the exacting attention to word texture which distinguished his best poetry. The opening line to "The Black Goddess" practically admits as much: "Silence, words into foolishness fading" (CP 283). Language becomes less like a delicate heuristic tool for searching out and shaping what can be known and more like a barely satisfactory medium for conveying a kind of knowing which somehow goes on outside the poem. "Timeless Meeting," for example, does nothing to coax us into imagining what the lovers' self-knowledge is like, or even what it feels like:

To have attained an endless, timeless meeting  
 By faith in the stroke which first engaged us,  
 Driving two hearts improbably together  
 Against all faults of history  
 And bodily disposition--

What does this mean? Prescience of new birth?  
 But one suffices, having paired us off  
 For the powers of creation--  
 Lest more remain unsaid.

Nor need we make demands or deal awards  
 Even for a thousand years:  
 Who we still are we know.

Exchange of love-looks came to us unsought  
 And inexpressible:

To which we stand resigned. (CP 519)

To put the most positive construction upon this poem, one might argue that there are some feelings which are so intense that one can only indicate them by asserting that they far exceed the limits of representation. Yet, in this

case, it seems as if the poet is so convinced of the impossibility of his poetic task that he believes he needn't bother grappling with language in a strained and undignified manner. As a result, we find such limply passive statements as: "Exchange of love looks came to us unsought/ And inexpressible."

As much as one might wish to champion Graves's later poetry on the grounds that it signals a triumphant expression of a love which is more tender, one can't help but feel that Graves's insistence upon the pristine stasis of the love in the later work whitewashes the reality of human relationships. Again, one has to remind oneself that Graves has been at times capable of making his words earn more than their keep and that his struggle to understand experience has been something that one could see unfolding in the poem itself, not in some alleged arena of consciousness lying outside of the reach of language. For instance, compare the piercingly accurate portrait of the emotional motivation of debauchery in "Leda" with the rather murky and staid resistance to it in the much later poem, "True Evil":

Heart, with what lonely fears you ached,  
 How lecherously mused upon  
 That horror with which Leda quaked  
 Under the spread wings of the swan.

Then soon your mad religious smile  
 Made taut the belly, arched the breast,  
 And there beneath your god awhile  
 You strained and gulped your beastliest.

Pregnant you are, as Leda was,  
 Of bawdry, murder and deceit;  
 Perpetuating night because  
 The after-languours hang so sweet. (CP 75)

All bodies have their yearnings for true evil,  
 A pall of darkness blotting out the heart,  
 Nor can remorse cancel luckless events  
 That rotted our engagements with Heaven's truth;  
 These are now history. Therefore once more  
 We swear perpetual love at love's own altar  
 And reassign our bodies, in good faith,  
 To faith in their reanimated souls.

But on our death beds shall our flaming passions  
 Revert in memory to their infantile  
 Delight of mocking the stark laws of love?  
 Rather let death concede a warning record  
 Of hells anticipated but foregone. (CP 516)

In "Leda" Graves sets in motion the complex interrelationships of emotional insecurity with fantasy-fed cravings; fanaticism and revulsion; and indulgence and emotional release. The rhyming of "deceit" and "sweet" characterizes in miniature the seductive nature of the conflict. The single-minded vision which emerges from the lecherous musings is brought to a disturbing pitch by the image of the "mad religious smile"; this phrase resoundingly conflates devotional urges with pathological ones. Supplying the reader with a sense of the tantalizing shiftings of the body as it stretches in a sexual posture-- "Made taut the belly, arched the breast"--Graves then puns on how the heart is certainly "beneath" its god as it writhes like a beast. Judgement falls swiftly upon the heart as it is found "pregnant" of "bawdry, murder and deceit," but the final genius of the poem resides in the

last two lines where one is told of the allure of the "after-languours." Interestingly, Graves's only revision to the poem after its initial publication in the Collected Poems of 1938 is in the final line where he removes the inappropriately damning adjective "[s]tale" and replaces it with the neutral article "[t]he." The lecherousness is duly condemned in the poem, but even in the clever internal rhyme of "after-lanquours hang," one is shown that the poet knows that this lingering infatuation retains a potency despite any moral disgust.

The wide-eyed gaze of "Leda" is missing from "True Evil." The heart is viewed as something that is "blotted out" by bodily yearnings, rather than something that participates in them. Any responsibility towards genuine struggle against "true evil" and "infantile delight" is made unclear by the very vagueness with which these dangers are described. It is much easier to forgo this "hell" which interferes with the swearing of "perpetual love at love's own altar" if it is never rendered with a fresh abstraction nor brought before one with any vividness.

Joined with what I have already referred to as the disappointing unworldly nature of love in Graves's later poetry is this ever-increasing insistence that love must be "perpetual." The frequency with which love is celebrated as a timeless state in the later poems--"Since love is an astonished always" (CP 415); "A day"..."which framed

eternity in a great lawn," "we had fallen in love forever" (CP 511)--serves to remind one of the poems in which he more credibly manages to find a lasting perspective upon love which anchors him in time rather than philosophically boosts him out of it. The painful but necessary awareness of transitoriness explored in poems like "Sick Love," "Pure Death" and "Counting the Beats" is one which is in many of the later poems summarily supplanted by a belief in a blissful eternal love.

## Conclusion



Graves's best poetry has been written with the understanding--to lift a phrase from "Recalling War" (CP 1938 129)--that his generation was witness to a "foundering of sublimities." His later career was dedicated to restoring a sense of the sublime to the "dust-bin" world of "pavement-feet" and "lift-faces" ruled by the desolately uninspired "great-devil" of urban utilitarianism satirized in his poem "Hell" (CP 74). His personal quest for a restoration of sublime values led him to conjure up a mythology, which, for all of its flourishing local beauty of the "leafy quince" and a "brow creamy as the crested wave" (CP 138), beguiled him away from the world rather than back into it with a renewed sense of specific purposes and responsibilities. One more reason why one resists being recruited to serve the goddess is that her love seems to give the poet excuses for shunning the world instead of providing guidance within it.<sup>13</sup>

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Another way of looking at the difference between how Graves views the Goddess and how he views "mortal" women is suggested by the differing attitudes Silas Marner has towards his beloved gold and towards his foundling daughter: "Unlike the gold which needed nothing, and must be worshipped in close-locked solitude--which was hidden away from the daylight, was deaf to the song of birds, and started to no human tones--Eppie was a creature of endless claims and ever-growing desires, seeking and loving sunshine, and living sounds, and living movements; making trial of everything, with trust in new joy, and stirring the human kindness in all eyes that looked on her. The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward, and carried them away from their old eager pacing towards the

As we have seen, Graves's later poetry lacks the clever explorativeness of his best efforts. Failing as he did to live up to his own standard set in his best poems of the twenties, thirties and forties, he betrayed the moving integrity portrayed in his highest achievements. All of the conventional excuses crowd in to help one explain what went wrong: poor old Graves's mind hardened into a kind of late middle-aged crustiness; he simply shot his bolt; his reputation as a great poet began to get in the way of his believing that he could ever write bad poems and so he published almost every one he wrote after the late fifties. None of these ordinary explanations and excuses, however plausible--or even truthful--as they may be, is particularly satisfactory. Most disturbingly, at times one begins to question the wisdom of his best poems; for if the openness to bewilderment and the keen awareness of the necessary connection between intellectual knowledge and emotional commitment which make his best poetry so valuable lead to the kind of pride or laziness which infected Graves's later career, why should one trust such moving, but perhaps ultimately inadequate poetic assessments of experience? Is

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same blank limit." George Eliot, Silas Marner (New York: Signet, 1960) 130. One is instantly reminded of the difference between the gushed-over Goddess and the woman addressed in "Through Nightmare" whose dreamy journeying

stirs  
My loving admiration, that you should travel  
Through nightmare to a lost and moated land,  
Who are timorous by nature. (CP 133)

one capable of gleaning all the wisdom from an admired author's best work without also perhaps acquiring some of that author's faulty and dangerous habits of thought and feeling?<sup>14</sup>

During a discussion about the depressing decline of Graves's later work, a thoughtful professor suggested to me, not entirely facetiously, that perhaps Graves should have tried to become a pornographer in his later years. "Pornographer" obviously has the wrong moral connotations, but I think what this professor meant was that Graves needed to write the beloved back into his poems in her full physical wondrousness, including perhaps the acknowledgement of her reciprocal bodily desires for him. Missing from the later work is anything like the beautiful raunchiness of Donne's "licence my roving hands, and let them go/ Before, behind, between, above, below"; or Gascoigne's "That happy hand which hardily did touch/ Thy tender body to my deep delight"; or even the moving witness to mingled sensuality and spirituality in Yvor Winters's "The Marriage":

And when I found your flesh did not resist  
 It was the living spirit that I kissed,  
 It was the spirit's change in which I lay:  
 Thus, mind in mind we waited for the day.  
 When flesh shall fall away, and, falling, stand

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<sup>14</sup> A principal danger in Graves's thought is nailed very solidly by one of Graves's most intelligent admirers, Michael Kirkham, in his essay, "Robert Graves's Debt to Laura Riding" from Focus on Robert Graves Dec. (1973) 3. "Laura Riding means what she says....with Graves we have merely watched someone undergoing personal conflict, thrashing about, and coming to a token conclusion." 41.

Wrinkling with shadow over face and hand,  
 Still shall I meet you on the verge of dust  
 And know you as a faithful vestige must.  
 And, in commemoration of our lust,  
 May our heirs seal us in a single urn,  
 A single spirit never to return.<sup>15</sup>

Vibrant awareness of the body is not found in Graves's later poetry. Even Larkin, who is not a love poet, could lament in his late poem "Aubade" that death would leave us with "No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,/ Nothing to love or link with."<sup>16</sup> Finally, one misses the individuality of love, the feeling that the beloved is gracefully unique, not one of a brood of potential goddesses or gods. Consider the gentle blending of the colloquial and the lyrical in June Jordan's "Sunflower Sonnet Number Two:"

Supposing we could just go on and on as two  
 voracious in the days apart as well as when  
 we side by side (the many days we do  
 that) well! I would consider then  
 perfection possible, or else worthwhile  
 to think about. Which is to say  
 I guess the costs of long term tend to pile  
 up, block and complicate, erase away  
 the accidental, temporary, near  
 thing/ pulsebeat promises one makes  
 because the chance, the easy new, is there  
 in front of you. But still, perfection takes  
 some sacrifice of falling stars for rare.  
 And there are stars, but none of you, to spare.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Yvor Winters, "The Marriage" Collected Poems (Chicago: Swallow, 1960) 62.

<sup>16</sup>Philip Larkin, "Aubade" Collected Poems, 208.

<sup>17</sup>June Jordan, in Strong Measures: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms, ed. and introd. by Philip Dacey and David Jauss (New York: Harper, 1986) 156.

Yet Graves's uniqueness is not solely due to his particular purchase on passionate love poetry. One aspect of Graves's work which sets him aside from many of his contemporaries is the child-like "cruel cheerfulness" and "nightmare-end-of-the-worldish atmosphere"<sup>18</sup> which he admits to valuing in Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories. This strangely amusing and unsettling aura can be found in poems such as "Lollocks," "It Was All Very Tidy," "The Haunted House," "Outlaws," "Ancestors," "Song: Lift-Boy," "Wm. Brazier," and "The Halls of Bedlam." The disquieting element in the comic nature of each of these poems is another small way in which Graves is certainly not behind the times in our century of mordant humourists such as Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Edward Gorey, and John Berryman.

The transfiguring sense of mystery associated with love expressed in many of his poems does place Graves firmly in an English poetic tradition, even if he is somewhat isolated in his own century. The wonder expressed in Renaissance poets such as Donne, Shakespeare and Marlowe is re-established in Graves's best love poems somewhat in the way it is in the more self-consciously anachronistic "poetic" passages from Christopher Fry's play, The Lady's Not For Burning (1949). (In this scene, Thomas is beginning to fall

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<sup>18</sup>Robert Graves, "Rudyard Kipling" in Scrutinies By Various Writers, ed. Edgell Rickword (London: Wishart, 1928) 92.



And when he stammered of a garden-guardian,  
Said the smooth lawns came by angelic favour,  
The pinks and pears in spite of his own blunders,  
They nudged at this conceit.

Well, he had something, though he called it nothing--  
An ass's wit, a hairy-belly shrewdness  
That would appraise the intentions of an angel  
By the very yard-stick of his own confusion,  
And bring the most to pass. (CP 60)

The gardener, not the goddess, is Graves's most enduring archetype. He epitomizes the underlying attitude of Graves's most memorable poetry that, in Michael Polanyi's words, "we know more than we can tell."<sup>20</sup> Graves's mind is one which is filled with the daily reminders of one's limitations, and it is greatly to his credit that his own workmanly persistence and "hairy-belly shrewdness" have enabled him at times to "bring the most to pass."

Graves's ongoing concern with the potential maladjustment between the claims of the body and the spirit has much to do with what makes him a major love poet. He gives poetic testimony to the ever-shifting combination of risk-taking spontaneity and arduous patience which are needed in loving relationships. In the final stanza of "Fact of the Act" we see the mind drawing the distinctions between romantic anticipation and the physical reality of love, without cancelling out the potency of either:

Yet expectation lies as far from fact  
As fact's own after-glow in memory;  
Fact is a dark return to man's beginnings,

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<sup>20</sup>Michael Polanyi, The Tacit Dimension (New York: Anchor, 1967) 5.

Test of our hardihood, test of a wilful  
 And blind acceptance of each other  
 As also flesh. (CP 377)

There is a refreshing essentialism in Graves, an unblinker belief that as urgent as the claims of our physicality might be, there is a spiritual need to see human endeavour in its barest essence (e.g. "Walk between dark and dark" ; "Children leave that string alone!" ; "Yet, be assured, we have no need/ To plot these acres of the mind" ; "Now must all satisfaction/ Appear mere mitigation/ Of an accepted curse?"). Further evidence of this tendency to divest ourselves of anything inessential, distracting, and trivial is found in "The Fingerhold":

He himself  
 Narrowed the rock shelf  
 To only two shoes' width,  
 And later by  
 A willing poverty  
 To half that width and breadth

He shrunk it then  
 By angry discipline  
 To a mere fingerhold,  
 Which was the occasion  
 Of his last confusion:  
 He was not so bold  
 As to let go  
 At last and throw  
 Himself on air that would uphold

He wept  
 Self-pityingly and kept  
 That finger crooked and strained  
 Until almost  
 His life was lost  
 And death not gained.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Robert Graves, "The Fingerhold" (approximate date of composition, 1931) in the manuscript collection at the State University of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.



The essentials of the mature Graves are in this poem. The formal tightness and experimentation--exemplified by the surprisingly elegant couplets at the beginning of each stanza as well as by the clinching triple-rhyme in the second stanza ("fingerhold," "bold," "uphold") --contribute to the "angry discipline" outlined in the poem. Graves repeatedly shows an understanding of the courage needed for self-improvement and self-acceptance. Most significantly, in this poem he shows the need for anger and the final intolerance of the self-pity which "almost" keeps him from throwing "himself on air that would uphold."

The brevity of Graves's best poems makes them easy to underestimate. From the mid-twenties, Graves frequently experimented with forms, but almost exclusively with the short poem. The necessary compression of the lyric poem has been noted by many twentieth-century critics--including I. A. Richards, Yvor Winters, and Cleanth Brooks--and Graves himself almost instinctively understood how, because of the close scrutiny given to the whole, each defect in a short poem is all the more noticeable, like blemishes on the faces of people crammed together in a well-lit bus. The care Graves took to use the simplest terms for even the most difficult of problems tackled in his poems is a discipline perpetuated in the work of Graves's admirers such as W. H. Auden, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Gavin Ewart, D. J. Enright, and Thom Gunn.

As I have demonstrated in Chapter Three, Graves's best poems are most often reasonable, even if they don't overtly celebrate reason in itself. Scepticism is more of an emotional than an intellectual state in Graves's work; his is a scepticism born of experience, not of a wide reading of Montaigne and Schopenhauer. The distrust of large generalizations in his poems is based on an a controlling attitude much like the one held by Rieux in Albert Camus' The Plague:

[G]iven the situation in which the whole town was placed, it might be said that every day lived through brought everyone, provided he survived, twenty-four hours nearer the end of his ordeal. Rieux could but admit the truth of [Rambert's] reasoning, but to his mind it was of rather too general an order.<sup>22</sup>

One of the great revelations for Graves, which does risk being of too general an order, but which provided him with ever-renewable opportunities for poems, is not the mysterious awe generated by the fact that we exist, but rather the bewildering recognition that we co-exist, sharing the world with other selves which have their own privacies, demands and allurements.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Albert Camus, The Plague, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin, 1985) 91.

<sup>23</sup>Graves's thematic influence in this area can be seen vividly in the following poem, "Division," by David Sutton in Out on a Limb, introd. by Robert Graves (London: Rapp and Whiting, 1969):

Although Graves treats the body's crude eagerness for gratification with irony, he is fairly persistent in not exempting the spirit from irony as well. As he implies in "Certain Mercies," both may be susceptible to pampering. However, the gratification of the spirit is something which Graves achieves in his self-avowed ability to recognize other aristocrats of the spirit, people whom, as he mentions while being interviewed by Gina Lollobrigida, he has "all his life been picking up and sorting them out and being aware of their existence, and it's very, very strange each time [one recognizes] that So and So has this quality which you can't define. The more you talk about it, the less it

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It is strange to think that to you I shall always be  
 Someone else, that however much we agree  
 In mind and body however true  
 Our love may be, to you I am always you.

All men are islands, so it has been said.  
 But islands spring from the one ocean bed.  
 If the seas of our division rolled away,  
 What joined us might lie open to the day.

But then, what seamed and blasted wilderness  
 Might be uncovered, what contrariness,  
 What strange and stranded monsters. Better so  
 To keep the seas between us, not to know

What lies beneath what seems serenity,  
 Accepting that to you I am not me,  
 Content with what is visible above,  
 The green and fertile islands of our love.

means."<sup>24</sup> These qualities presumably belong to Graves's sacrosanct category of "the yet unsayable."

When listing Graves's merits, we see that his claim on our attention is due to the accumulated weight of individual qualities in many different poems rather than to a single masterpiece or a particular stylistic breakthrough. And the list is impressive: formal variousness coupled with rich experimentation with poetic forms; tacit understanding of the role of the body; the refusal to write according to trends or to be the leader of a new trend (much like his acknowledged model in this, Thomas Hardy); mastery of an at times likeably urgent and irascible tone; practice of the demanding plain style; consistent striving for emotional honesty; psychological probity; well-deployed learning and literate fluidity; consummate control of traditional versification and Welsh cygnaeth; gracefully executed phrasing; stinging ironic wit and a peculiar whimsicality in a "serious age" (perhaps a bit like Willian Carlos Williams in this). Finally, Graves has an astounding ability to make poems which are like individuals, each affected by both contemporaries and predecessors, travelling between genetic destiny and a muddle of glorious accidents, determined efforts, bizarre coincidences and hard luck. All of these

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<sup>24</sup>Robert Graves, "A Redbook Dialogue" (1963) in Conversations With Robert Graves, ed. Frank Kersnowski (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1969) 59.

qualities, when considered together in their full cumulative power, give us reason to believe that Graves is one of the most persistently candid and variously-gifted poets of this century.

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