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Patterned silks and khaki scraps: Robert Graves Redivivus.

'My passport', says Robert Graves in his autobiography, *Good-bye to All That*, 'gives my nationality as "British subject"'. He goes on:

Here I might parody Marcus Aurelius, who begins his Golden Book with the various ancestors and relations to whom he owes the virtues of a worthy Roman Emperor. Something of the sort about myself, and why I am not a Roman Emperor or even, except on occasions, an English gentleman. My mother's father's family, the von Ranke's, was a family of Saxon country pastors, not anciently noble. Leopold von Ranke, the first modern historian, my great-uncle, brought the 'von' into the family.... Heinrich von Ranke, my grandfather... married, in London, my grandmother, a Schleswig-Dane [...]. About the other side of my family. The Graves' have a pedigree that dates back to the Conquest, but is good as far as the reign of Henry VII. Colonel Graves, the regicide who was Ireton's chief of horse, is claimed as the founder of the Irish branch of the family. Limerick was its centre.... My grandfather, on this side, was Protestant Bishop of Limerick.... Of my father's mother, who was a Scotswoman, a Cheyne from Aberdeen, I have been able to get no information at all... The Cheyne pedigree was better than the Graves'; it was flawless right back to the medieval Scottish kings, to the two Balliols, the first and second Davids, and the Bruce.

Graves's obvious pride, however mischievous his tone may be, in this complicated German-Danish-Irish-Scottish heritage is also a delight in slipping the nets of expectation. For many readers, Graves is the quintessential Englishman – upper-class, public school and Oxbridge educated, a Captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers (enlisting straight from the school's O.T.C.) – whose eccentricities serve only to confirm his self-assurance, the certainty of his 'place' in the world-order. And for many readers too, Graves is known in and through the texts, published relatively early in his career, which outsold anything else he ever wrote: the war memoir *Good-bye to All That* (1929), his biography of Lawrence of Arabia, *Lawrence and the Arabs* (1927), and – best-known of all perhaps, in consequence of their adaptation for BBC TV in the 1960s – the *Claudius* novels (1934).

Yet, as is often the case with Graves, the more detailed the information we are given, as we chase the beginning or end of the line ('I, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus This-that-and-the-other...'), the more elusive he becomes. On the one hand there is the story of Graves the (English) prose writer, some of whose works are undisputed 'modern classics' in the literary canon, whose regimental loyalty remained undiminished despite his long and traumatic service in the trenches of the First World War, and who tried to serve his country again at the outbreak of World War II. On the other is the story of a man who wrote prose for the money (such as it was), who resolved early on 'never to make England my home again', and devoted his life to the service of the Muse. 'Since the age of fifteen', he tells us in *The White Goddess* (1948), 'poetry has been my ruling passion and I have never intentionally undertaken any task or formed any relationship that seemed inconsistent with poetic principles, which has sometimes won me the reputation of an eccentric'. Famous for his historical novels, he nonetheless declares himself to be free from history: as he writes

in *The Common Asphodel* (1949), ‘for the last twenty-two years [I] have abandoned the view that the poet is a public servant ministering to the caprices of a world in perpetual flux. I now regard him as independent of fashion and public service, a servant only of the true Muse, committed on her behalf to continuous personal variations on a single pre-historic, or post-historic, poetic theme; and have thus ceased to feel the frantic strain of swimming against the stream of time.’ Shaped as he undoubtedly was by modern warfare, he deliberately opts out of a life ‘geared to the industrial machine’: ‘I am nobody’s servant and have chosen to live on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle’ (*The White Goddess*, 2nd ed. 1952).

Gravesian ‘poetic principles’, as manifest in the life and work, have not always met with approval. His professed devotion to his White (later Black) goddess (‘mumbo-jumbo’: Donald Davie); his speculations on tree alphabets (‘interminable’: Harold Bloom); his subservience to Laura Riding (‘pussywhipped’: Anthony Burgess), have all taken their toll on his reputation. So has his dismissive attitude, particularly in the 1955 Clark Lectures, towards other poets such as Yeats (‘a new technique but nothing to say’); Pound (author of the ‘sprawling, ignorant, indecent, unmelodious, seldom metrical *Cantos*, embellished with...illiterate Greek, Latin, Spanish, and Provencal snippets’); Eliot (who at least ‘had once been, however briefly, a poet’); Auden (whose ‘half-guinea...paid for Laura Riding’s *Love as Love, Death as Death*, gave him no right to borrow half lines and whole lines from them for insertion in his own verse’), and Dylan Thomas (‘He himself never pretended to be anything more than a young dog – witty, naughty, charming, irresponsible, and impenitent’). Philip Larkin is not the only English poet who struggles to reconcile Graves’s mythopoeic world view and pronouncements on poetry with the kind of poetry Graves himself wrote. Nor has he been easy to ‘place’ in twentieth-century English poetry: proclaiming himself an outsider, the servant only of the Muse, he has not been easily conscripted for any of the groupings – from Modernism and the Thirties generation to the Movement and the ‘new poetry’ – through which the history of that poetry is so often told.

As if wilfully to compound the problem, Graves’s reluctance to be pinned down extends beyond genealogy and geography to the ground of the text itself – which time and time again is taken from beneath the reader’s feet. Over his sixty-year writing career, Graves published no fewer than eight *Collected Poems*. In each new *Collected* he revised poems, often radically; and each *Collected* redefines the shape of Graves’s past, by omitting poems (including most of his Great War poems) that he no longer considered part of his story. By the time his last *Collected Poems* appeared in 1975, only 189 of the 536 poems that appeared in books before 1959 made the final cut. The ever-shifting *oeuvre* generated by such extreme authorial decisions (which made some of his best-loved poems as hard to find as the vanishing point of his own origins) left readers, literally, at a loss. That situation was redressed in part by a *Selected Poems* edited by Paul O’Prey in 1986, and more fully, by the publication of a Penguin Classics edition of the *Complete Poems* (2003), edited by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward. The *Complete Poems* is a monumental achievement. But the sheer scale of the monument – over a thousand poems – is daunting; and almost a third of it comprises poems written from 1960-1975, the last years of his writing life, where Graves was over-prolific and at times over-determined, sometimes forgetting what he

himself more clearly sees, in 'Dance of Words', as the need to 'start from lightening / And not forecast the rhythm...'

It is tempting to think of Graves, like Hardy or Whitman before him, as *sui generis*, as the outsider who is at once everywhere and nowhere, finding a 'home' in Majorca if never quite 'at home' in the English poetic tradition. But he is not without obvious poetic affinities, however much they may have been lost to sight in recent decades. W.H. Auden's famous elegy for Yeats described the elder poet as 'silly like us', yet whose 'gift survived it all'. The 'silliness' – Yeats's *Vision* dictated to his wife by spirits; his belief in magic; his occult practices – is in evidence in a different way in Graves too: oghams not the occult, magic mushrooms if not magic *per se*, goddesses rather than gyres. So too is the poetic 'gift' that survives it all. If it is not 'mad Ireland' that hurts Graves into poetry, the complex politics of identity, thrown into sharp relief by the 'silly / Mad War', as he calls it in 'Over the Brazier', in which he fought, hurt him into the creation of an extra-poetic apparatus, and into the living of an extraordinary life, in order to preserve and enable the 'ruling passion' of poetry. The links between Graves and his most immediate precursor, links that he would always strongly deny, are sometimes so obvious, indeed, as to make his denials a perverse form of affirmation. Yeats and Graves are also twin poles of influence for a later generation of Irish poets, who encountered Graves's work in the 1950s, when his poetic powers were at their height, and when the body of work he had produced up to that point contained some of the outstanding poems of the century: 'Mid-Winter Waking', 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice', 'Counting the Beats', 'The White Goddess'.

It's fitting, therefore, that Graves, who sometimes did himself few favours, should now be re-presented to a contemporary audience; and by one of his immediate 'descendents' in Ireland, Michael Longley. Longley's superb new edition of Graves's *Selected Poems* (2013) is welcome on several fronts: first, in its skilful distillation from a massive *oeuvre* of an intelligible Graves whose poetic brilliance is in evidence on every page of the book; second, in its recovery of the war poems suppressed by Graves, those 'khaki scraps' without which the Gravesian story is incomplete. Third, and more obliquely perhaps, the selection reminds us both of Graves's Irish heritage and, more importantly, of his legacy in Ireland, as a poet and critic profoundly influential – in diverse ways – on the work of Montague, Longley, Heaney, and Mahon, as well as on that of Paul Muldoon or Peter McDonald. Graves is not here 'recovered' for Ireland in the manner of MacNeice – whose reputation, as Mahon put it, came 'to rest' in his birthplace, the North of Ireland, in the 1970s. Graves, who delighted that his father 'broke the geographical connexion with Ireland' before he was born, sits uneasily as an 'Irish poet', and John Montague's inclusion of Graves in the *Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1974) was not uncontroversial. Writing to Graves in March 1974, Montague observes that 'My Irish anthology has risen an English hare. I will endeavour to tweak his tail a little on your behalf, by reminding him of your ancestry and many statements on the subject...'. Later the same year, Montague tells him: 'I had a great time defending your Irishness against ignorant reviewers who seem to have such set views'.

Nevertheless, whilst Graves may have been less concerned to affirm his 'Irishness' than Montague (he does so at school, under pressure from his peers about his German side in the context of a pre-War spirit of Entente Cordiale, and occasionally thereafter

when claiming particular insights into other Irish writers, or Celtic scholarship), the foreword to Graves's *Collected Poems* 1959 does contain within it an explicit claim about his 'poetic tradition' that he makes nowhere else:

These poems follow a roughly chronological order. The first was written in the summer of 1914, and shows where I stood at the age of nineteen before getting caught up by the First World War, which permanently changed my outlook on life.

Sixteen years of the forty-five that have since elapsed were spent in England; nineteen in Spain – which has become my permanent home – most of the rest in Wales, France, Egypt, Switzerland and the United States. But somehow these poems have never adopted a foreign accent or colouring; they remain true to the Anglo-Irish poetic tradition into which I was born.

It is that sense of a shared tradition that informs the relationship between Montague and Graves, and Montague helped to organise Graves's only poetry readings in Ireland, in 1975. For Longley, as for Mahon, it is this 1959 *Collected Poems* which made Graves 'one of our heroes'. In the introduction to his Graves *Selected*, he describes how he and Mahon 'read his poems aloud to each other, counting the beats with our hands...' whilst both undergraduates at Trinity. 'As a master of the singing line, complex syntax and stanzaic patterns', he goes on to say, 'Graves was an ideal focus for two apprentices.' Early poems published in the student magazine *Icarus* evidence a Gravesian, as well as Yeatsian haunting, as in Mahon's 'Whatever Fall or Blow' (with its echoes of 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' and 'The White Goddess', as well as Yeats's 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd') from March 1961:

The uncertainty of words
Spoken alone, the quaint
Coinage of looks that bridge
No chaos, invoke no saint,
Of two who, worlds apart,
Came so without complaint.

An early essay in *Icarus* (March 1962) by Edna Longley – then Edna Broderick and also an undergraduate at Trinity – gives some indication of the critical climate in which she, Longley, and Mahon were discovering and appreciating Graves. Too often, she complains, 'poetry comes a poor second to poetics, philosophy, sensation, self-pity, literature, or superficial aspects of the modern world. There is a frequent misunderstanding as to what is powerful and modern in poetry, a tendency to be moved by shock tactics of statement and description. Good poetry never shocks – it chills or warms. Four of the most powerful lines in modern poetry occur in a poem by Robert Graves about Christmas trees:

But he knew better, did the Christmas robin –
The murderous robin with his breast aglow
And legs apart, in a spade-handle perched:
He prophesied more snow, and worse than snow.'

The comments are a slightly more restrained version of the effect, or the 'strange feeling' generated by poetry as outlined by Graves himself in *The White Goddess*. A.E. Housman's test of a true poem', he tells us, 'was simple and practical: does it make the hairs of one's chin bristle if one repeats it silently while shaving?' (It's a male-only beardless test.) The difficulty in achieving the surface simplicity that nevertheless has the capacity to 'chill or warm', or as Graves has it to generate both 'delight and horror', is evident in Mahon's juvenilia. A Gravesian ambition informs 'O Where Now is Robin' (*Icarus*, 1961) albeit not fully realised at this stage:

O where now is Robin, the snowman I made
With my own hands, with my own hands?

...

O who killed Cock Robin, so red and white?
The killer bird rose with flaming glands

In the dead of night, in the dead of night,
And tore him apart with your own hands,

With your own hands.

Graves was in the air in Belfast as well as Dublin in the early 1960s. In *Stepping Stones*, recalling his courtship of Marie, Seamus Heaney notes that ‘At St Mary’s College, Marie had done extended essays on Louis MacNeice and Robert Graves; this meant that, from the start, poetry was one of the elements in the mix. So there was a muse energy in the air all right. “The wood astir”, as Graves says. A call to separateness, to some sort of extravagance, to be more yourself’. He alludes here to the final stanza of Graves’s ‘The White Goddess’:

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 may fall.

‘The wood astir’ also evokes an early unpublished war poem (‘The Survivor Comes Home’), written, he tells us, ‘when I had the horrors’, that as yet lacks the mythological compensation for suffering:

What stirs in the drenching wood?
What drags at my heart, my feet?
What stirs in the wood?

Nothing stirs, nothing cries.

But it is the post-1945 Graves of goddess-worship, with the cyclical pattern of sacrificial death and rebirth enshrined in his mythological thinking, who speaks most immediately to Heaney in the 1960s – more than the Graves of ‘complex syntax and stanzaic patterns’, or, indeed, of a sometimes metaphysical bleakness that calls to Mahon’s imagination. (‘Extravagance’ is present in Graves’s ideas and his prose writings, but seldom in his poetry.) Heaney’s early criticism, more so than his poetry, is packed with Gravesian borrowings – from the ‘cults and devotees of a god and goddess’ and the play of masculine against feminine, to his early observations on the nature of inspiration. The influence of Graves is deep-rooted and long-lasting: almost four decades later, as he tells us in *Stepping Stones*, Heaney lectured at Harvard on both Graves and Horace as poets ‘writing about transformation caused by the “bright bolt” of terror’, finding, after 9/11, that the ‘shock-and-awe factor...matched what I and everybody else was feeling’.

The Gravesian legacy in Ireland is as complex and contradictory as the man himself. As a love poet, the influence of poems such as ‘Mid-Winter Waking’, ‘Counting the

Beats' or 'She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep', those flawless lyrics of Graves's middle years, is evident in Montague's 'All Legendary Obstacles', Mahon's 'Preface to a Love Poem', Longley's 'Epithalamion', or Heaney's 'Poem: *for Marie*'. But the technically accomplished muse-poetry is only one element in an infinitely various and war-haunted *oeuvre*. Longley opens his *Selected Graves* with a little-known (uncollected) poem, 'The Patchwork Quilt', included in a letter to Sassoon in July 1918:

Here is this patchwork quilt I've made
Of patterned silks and old brocade,
Small faded rags in memory rich
Sewn each to each in feather stitch,
But if you stare aghast perhaps
At certain muddied khaki scraps
Or trophy-fragments of field grey,
Clotted and torn, a grim display
That never decked white sheets before,
Blame my dazed head, blame bloody war.

Longley's own poetry is littered with khaki scraps too – the memories passed on by his father, a veteran of the First World War. And the 'patchwork' of this poem puts the two poets in dialogue in a way which is almost uncanny: Longley, before encountering this poem in 2012, had, more than a decade earlier, stitched his own poems into the quilt of *The Weather in Japan* (2000): 'Sometimes the quilts were white for weddings, the design / Made up of stitches and the shadows cast by stitches. / And the quilts for funerals? How do you sew the night?' ('The Design'). In *The White Goddess* Graves argues that 'it is not too much to say that all original discoveries and inventions and musical and poetic compositions are the result of proleptic thought – the anticipation, by means of a suspension of time, of a result that could not have been arrived at by inductive reasoning – and of what may be called analeptic thought, the recovery of lost events by the same suspension'. It is appropriate enough, therefore, that the later poet is written into the fabric of Graves's own poetry, as Graves himself, dazed by 'bloody war', nevertheless survives to be written by his 'heirs' into the tapestry of Irish literary history.