

LIFE AND LETTERS

REMEMBERING ROBERT GRAVES

*He was considered by many to be a poet's poet.
Or was he just a bit mad—and after love for its own sake?*

BY ALASTAIR REID

HAD he lived, Robert Graves would have been a hundred years old this past July; as it happened, he died at ninety, in November of 1985, in the village of Deyá, on the rocky northwestern coast of Majorca, where he had made his home for half of his long life, and where I first met him, in the summer of 1953. We enjoyed a close friendship, in the form of an endless conversation, until it was abruptly and irretrievably severed in 1961. Very seldom do I think of those years, but I was considerably formed and changed by them. This year, Graves's name is very much in the air, with three biographies, a documentary film, an endearing memoir of him by his son William, symposia on his work, and an act of homage by the Majorcan government. Carcanet Press, in Britain, is to reprint most of his work—an eight-year project, since he published more than a hundred and thirty books in his lifetime. His life and his writings so interact that they cannot be unravelled: writing was how he lived.

The English have always kept Graves at a distance, as if he were an offshore island, out of the mainstream—something they quite often do with English writers who choose to live elsewhere and are still successful. Even so, he is now firmly lodged in literary history, and critics may write of him without incurring one of his famously withering broadsides. Those who know his work well probably think first of his poetry; many people, however, know his name only from the television version of "I, Claudius." Generally, the book of his that first springs to mind is "Good-bye to All That," the autobiography he pro-

duced in 1929, out of a time of great personal stress.

Never was a title more fervently meant: as he put it, the book dealt with "what I was, not what I am." Its tone is one of blunt irreverence; by writing it, he was shedding his past, and turning his back on England and what he saw as the hypocrisy of its values and public institutions. He wrote it as one who had survived the tyrannies of conventional schooling and the dehumanizing horrors of the trenches, and no book of his did more to imprint his name on the attention of the public. He fled England just before it was published, leaving behind him a past he had chosen to renounce, even though he had already been irrevocably formed by it.

Graves had an Irish father, a German mother, a Scottish grandmother, a patrician English upbringing, a Welsh predilection, and a classical education. His whole personality formed itself from a mass of oppositions, of contraries. His father, a minor poet and a celebrated writer of Irish songs, worked as a school inspector in London. A widower left with five children to look after, he remarried, in 1891, a grandniece of the German historian Leopold von Ranke, and this genetic connection was one that Graves often invoked. Narrow-minded and pious both, his mother imposed a stern morality on her husband and children, and saddled Robert with a moral scrupulousness that left him socially inept and ill-prepared for the rigors of an English public school. In 1909, Graves was sent to Charterhouse, where his middle name, von Ranke, occasioned general derision, even outright persecution, as did his piety and his

priggishness about sex. Although studies were not fashionable at Charterhouse, he took refuge in them. He left school just as the First World War was breaking out, and some ten days later he enlisted with a commission in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Not yet twenty, he was in France, and at the front, amid the running horror of death and decay every fearful day. In July, 1916, at the beginning of the Somme offensive, Graves was wounded by shrapnel, four days before he turned twenty-one; shortly afterward, the notice of his death from wounds appeared in the *London Times*.

He talked to me often about the war. My father had been wounded in the same battle: my mother kept in a small box the bullet that had been taken from his lung; I could scarcely hold it. Graves told me once that he considered himself exceptionally lucky in knowing that nothing that happened to him afterward could ever match the horror that he had gone through in the trenches.

The war left Graves in a precarious state, shell-shocked and suffering from severe war neurosis. It was during this time that Graves, accompanying his close friend Siegfried Sassoon to neuroathenic treatment, met the presiding physician, Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, who had once been an anthropologist and was now a neurologist. After the war, Graves continued to visit him in Cambridge, where Rivers was a professor. Rivers planted in Graves's mind an interest in matriarchal societies and woman rule, which would later find fuller expression in his controversial work "The White Goddess." More im-

PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN

Robert Graves and his daughter Lucia, Majorca, 1962.

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Alastair Reid and Robert Graves posing for a photographer during a 1958 United States lecture tour.

mediately, Rivers made Graves see that his cure was in writing; that the unconscious was the source not only of his nightmares but also of his creativity. He urged Graves to use his poetry to explore his pain. I think Rivers did more than anyone to show Graves just how his life and art were essentially connected. From that time on, Graves wrote whenever he could, wherever he was, convinced that in poetry lay a hope of sanity but at the same time suspecting that his "insanity" made his poetry possible: were he to be entirely sane, his creativity might dry up. He needed his madness, his nerve. The poetry was in the pain.

While Graves was still in the Army, he abruptly proposed marriage, after short acquaintance, to Nancy Nicholson, then eighteen, sister of Ben Nicholson, the painter. She had strong feminist opinions for her day and refused to assume the married name of Graves (her two girls bear the Nicholson surname, her two boys that of Graves). Now a civilian and without qualifications or money, Graves elected to go to Oxford and eventually read for a degree in literature in the hope that it might lead to a teaching post. Money remained a recurring problem, although he and Nancy were full of plans as to how to earn it.

They were mired in domesticity; he shopped, cooked, washed, attended to the children, and wrote furiously all the time. By now he and Nancy had become more comrades than lovers, joined in a constant money worry. Enthralled by some poems of a young American poet he had read in *The Fugitive*, Graves had begun to correspond with their author, Laura Riding. They exchanged literary opinions, and Graves, impressed by her intelligence and her near-belligerent confidence, invited her to join Nancy and him to work with them. She arrived in England in early 1926, and for the next thirteen years she was to dominate Graves's existence, to prove his nemesis.

LAURA RIDING's influence on those who knew her owes more to her emphatic presence than to her writings, although it would have meant death to say it to her. I have known seven people who were close to her during her time with Graves, and something of the

same dazed and faraway look came into their eyes whenever they spoke of her. Certain of her own supreme worth and intelligence, certain that her poetry was bringing a new clarity to language, Riding felt her work had been too sparsely appreciated at home, and she accepted Graves's invitation, hoping to find in Europe some like-minded souls. Graves had accepted a post lecturing on English literature in Cairo, and a week after her arrival in England Laura embarked for Egypt with the entire family, who already regarded her as an essential presence. The stay in Egypt proved less than fruitful, and after four months Graves resigned, and sailed, with the family, back to England. He was entranced by Laura. Where Graves wrestled with dualities, Laura was single-mindedly certain. The ferocity of her judgments occasionally verged on cruelty. To Graves, she was at once a demanding mentor, a clarifier, and a stimulating collaborator, utterly without doubts. He was also deeply in love with her. At first, he and Laura and Nancy declared themselves The Trinity and lived together. Soon, however, he moved to London to work there with Laura. Graves saw Laura's coming into his life, through poetry, as a magical event; he could do nothing but accept it.

The continuing story of Robert and Laura is a turbulent one, often painful, sometimes touching the edge of madness. Graves bore it stoically: the break with Nancy and the children, a rival for Laura's affections, her suicide leap from an upper window and her convalescence. In October of 1929, he and Laura left England behind, and made their way eventually to Majorca. The success of "Good-bye to All That" had shown Graves a way to survive as a poet. He said often that he bred show dogs in order to be able to afford a cat. The dogs were prose; the cat was poetry. Thanks to his show dogs, he was able to buy land and build a house, and to start up with Laura a small colony of clarity and literary industry in Deyá, which she ruled by will and whim. Graves now gave way to her entirely, declaring her work far above his. In 1933, he wrote the two *Claudius* novels, and they came out to great acclaim the following year. Laura disparaged them, although they were the source of all funds; he begged his friends never to

mention any of his work in front of her, and in new publishing contracts he insisted that a work of hers be published along with his. He discussed endlessly with Laura his growing interest in goddess worship. To it she added the vehemence of her own ideas, and soon she became to Graves not simply critic and mentor and lover and poet but muse. Later, she claimed to have been the source of all Graves's notions of poetry as goddess worship. She was not. She was much more: she was their incarnation.

By 1936, the Spanish Civil War was looming and, as foreign residents, Robert and Laura were given the choice of leaving immediately on a British destroyer from Palma, the capital of Majorca, or remaining to take their chances on an island that had shown itself to be predominantly pro-Franco. They left, and the Spanish frontier closed behind them. Although Graves went back to England, it was no longer his country. Any return to Spain seemed unlikely, war in Europe being nearly inevitable. The couple felt themselves fugitives, refugees; relations between them had grown more distant, although Graves remained unswervingly loyal to Laura. A sign came in the form of an adulatory mention of her poems in *Time* by one Schuyler Jackson, a friend of a friend of Graves. Intrigued, Laura abruptly decided to return to America; arrangements were made, and Graves found himself in early 1939 accompanying her to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where the Jacksons had a farm. Again, events took several savage turns. Laura assumed what she considered her rightful place at the center of the magic circle, and took upon herself the rearranging of the lives around her. Jackson's wife was declared a witch and driven to breakdown. Graves was given his notice as collaborator and champion. She and Jackson were eventually to marry and move to Florida. Broken in spirit, Graves returned to England just as war was breaking out in Europe.

Graves never saw Laura again, yet he remained forever mesmerized by her: if her name came up in conversation, he would frequently go silent, slipping into a trance of memory. His rejection by Laura had wounded him deeply, but he refused to speak ill of her. In any case, he had found refuge in a new love. Alan Hodge, then a

young poet and later Graves's valued collaborator, had brought his young wife, Beryl, into the circle, and they followed Laura and Robert to America. As the dramas unfolded, Robert found in Beryl's company a quiet, cool sanity that he badly needed, and a devotion to which he was not slow to respond. With Alan Hodge's eventual blessing, Beryl joined Robert in England, and she never left him. War had broken out, uncertainties loomed, but Graves settled down with Beryl in the Devon countryside, and for the next six years he poured out work—writing poems, producing historical novels for which he did prodigious reading, and collaborating with Alan Hodge on a crisp, eminently sensible, and often humorous study of English prose style, called "The Reader Over Your Shoulder," the most useful of all his books, as he said. His life with Beryl was calm and sustaining; it was also spiced by her humor—something Graves had not enjoyed for some time.

GRAVES has described how, at his desk in early 1944, he felt a sudden surge of illumination, and began feverishly writing the manuscript that was to be published as "The White Goddess." Subtitled "A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth," it was to become a sacred book to a fair number of poets, and to enjoy a great vogue in the sixties, though more as a "magic" book than as a brilliantly argued synthesis of all Graves's most fundamental preoccupations: his reading in the classics, his conversations with Rivers, his immersion in both Celtic and classical myth and history, and his own firm sense of what was required of a dedicated poet.

Since the Bronze Age, the figure of an all-embracing female deity—a Moon Goddess, an Earth Mother, controlling seasons, fertility, and the cycle of birth and death—had been worshipped throughout Europe until challenged by the male gods of the Greco-Roman world. With Christianity, goddess worship disappeared, preserved, according to Graves, by poets alone as a divine secret—or through the worship of a muse. From his vast reading, Graves created a monomyth that gave order to his deepest convictions and restored to poetry some of the

sanctity he felt it had lost by neglecting myth for reason.

Graves was a deicide; he had made from the great tangle of his existence a religion that he could feel true to, and which could resolve the contradictions and oppositions in his thinking. As a devotee, he was privy to the Goddess's will. He always bowed solemnly nine times at his first sight of the new moon. To the supplanting of the Goddess by a Father God he attributed all the ills of the modern world.

It is, of course, possible to read "The White Goddess" as pure wish fulfillment, as a projection into human history of precisely what Graves needed to believe in, ingeniously disguised as investigative scholarship, and which would justify the succession of young, beautiful muses whom Graves lit on in his later years. In it merged his fears and his ecstasies—his exacting mother, his war-horror, his trials with Laura, his sexual terrors and longings, the state of inspiration he equated with being in love, the coming together of dualities in a poem.

At the time, T. S. Eliot worked for Faber & Faber, and although he was somewhat overawed by the manuscript of "The White Goddess," he was certain of its importance and agreed to publish the book. The war ground to an end, and Graves began to raise his hopes of returning to Spain. He and Beryl now had three children, William, Lucia, and Juan; a fourth, Tomas, was born later, in Deyá. In 1946, Graves pulled strings and received permission to return. In the spring of 1946, a small plane landed them in Palma—Graves, Beryl, and the children. They found that Robert's house, Canelluñ, and its garden had been tended and maintained, books and papers in place. The villagers were delighted at the return of Don Roberto, as an omen of sorts. He had come back, to begin Deyá again.

A MOUNTAIN chain runs along that coast of Majorca, and from its lower slopes the land falls away steeply to the Mediterranean. The coastline is broken by protruding rocky headlands, enclosing long, fertile valleys and small, secret beaches. Deyá comes as a surprise, perched halfway between mountain and sea. The upper part of the village is cone-shaped, with the houses on

each other's shoulders, winding down from the church at the crest. Nothing is flat except for the terraces that descend like a series of steps from the base of the overhanging mountain, the Teix, which dominates and dwarfs the village, making it feel small. The terraces are planted with olive trees—puffs of silver-green—and with gnarled almond trees. At sunset, the great wall of the Teix goes through a constant shifting of color and shadow: light gold, ochre, amber, deep gray, dark. A short main street is lined with the village's essential outposts—butcher, baker, grocer, telegraphist, garage, café. The folds in the landscape form acoustical traps, so that miscellaneous sounds—the crack of an axe, a mule braying, conversation, the thud of a boat's motor, a girl somewhere singing—float in, breaking the mesmerizing silence. In the hot summer sun, the village seems suspended, half asleep. The land is so up-and-down that every window frames a different view, the air so clear that around the full moon the whole face of the Teix is drenched in bright silver, towering above the sleeping houses, the moonlight almost bright enough to read by.

Spain in the early fifties seemed to

be still waking up, coming back to life, docile under Franco. Its frontiers had been sealed off from the rest of Europe since the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, in 1936, and had remained so throughout the Second World War. The country felt worn out, threadbare. Travelling was unpredictable, traffic sparse, food hardly plentiful. Agricultural communities like Deyá, however, had fared better through these lean years, for they could feed themselves, working the land by hand and mule. To local people, shuttered up for so long, foreigners were something of a novelty—a situation that in ten years changed beyond anyone's imagining. Deyá's population in the fifties must have been about five hundred. For the villagers, the foreigners' antics fulfilled the function that television does today.

One evening in the summer of 1953, I was sitting on the terrace of a small *pensión* in Deyá, watching the sunset play itself out on the face of the Teix. I had gone there, with quiet in mind, on the advice of a travel agent—I had no idea that Graves lived there. Suddenly, through the beaded fly-curtain, Robert erupted. He cut a formidable figure—tall, bearlike, with a large torso and head, a straw hat, a straw basket shoul-

THE LOST JEWEL

Who on your breast pillows his head now,
Jubilant to have won
The heart beneath on fire for him alone,

At dawn will hear you, plagued by nightmare,
Mumble and weep
About some blue jewel you were sworn to keep.

Wake, blink, laugh out in reassurance,
Yet your tears will say,
"It was not mine to lose or give away.

"For love it shone, never for the madness
Of a strange bed—
Light on my finger, fortune in my head."

Roused by your naked grief and beauty,
For lust he will burn:
"Turn to me, sweetheart! Why do you not turn?"

—ROBERT GRAVES
(December 25, 1954)

dered, and a look set on the edge of truculence. He sat himself down and started asking me a series of questions, as though mapping me. Then he reached for the book I was reading—Samuel Butler's "Notebooks." He crowed with pleasure and began looking for his favorite passages, telling Butler anecdotes with zest. Abruptly he got up, thanked me for the conversation, and left. After I came to know Robert well, I found that he often assessed people suddenly by some sign—a mannerism, a stray remark, a misplaced enthusiasm. I imagine that if I had been reading Ezra Pound's "Cantos" my memory of Graves might fill no more than this paragraph.

At the time, I was teaching at Sarah Lawrence, which left me long free summers. I had published some poems in *The New Yorker* and also a book of poems, slim in every respect, but I had begun to feel that writing and teaching went uneasily together; I had no idea how to live as a writer, though. What I wanted, emphatically, was to own my own time. It was this that drew me to Robert's existence—how he was able to live in the slow rhythms of Deyá and yet keep up a vigorous writing life. Robert was fifty-eight at the time, a veteran; I was twenty-seven, and an aspirant, no more. It was his lived example that led me to cut loose, to decide to live by writing.

I ran into Robert at odd moments during that summer—at the beach, in the café for the mail delivery, in the village store—and each time he would launch straight into conversation: what he had been writing that day, how to cope with ants. One afternoon, he took me back with him to Canelluñ, his house beyond the village. There, sitting in his workroom, narrow, high-ceilinged, and walled with his essential books, we talked about poetry. At that time, I was immersed in poetry, and read it voraciously; I also knew a whole host of poems by heart. Robert's prodigious memory was even more crammed, and this meant that sometimes, on a walk, one of us would produce a poem from the air which we would

then explore with a fine editorial point, questioning it, sometimes rewriting it, or even parodying it. It was a conversational mode we often returned to, as a kind of game.

A few foreigners lived in Deyá the year round—a sculptor, a clutch of painters, a writer or two—for houses were easily available and cheap to rent. It had regular visitors, who returned faithfully each summer, and a few families from Palma summered there with their children. Life was frugal, somewhat bare-boned—water drawn from the well, cooking done on charcoal, electricity supplied by a local turbine that came on at dark and ran until eleven-thirty, when it winked three times and, ten minutes later, candles lit, went out. So simplified, the days seemed slowed. Robert and I exchanged letters over the winter, I returned the following summer, and eventually I resigned from Sarah Lawrence and moved to Spain.

From 1953 on, I spent part of each year in Deyá, usually renting a different village house, whitewashed, sparsely furnished, stony, and cool. I came to know the Graves household very well. Its center of concern was always Robert, but Beryl, who knew his changes better than anyone else, kept him attached to daily realities—the garden's needs, who was coming when—and she had a way of bringing him back to earth with an oblique humor, which the children caught and copied: they would tease Robert by asking improbable

questions, and he would answer in kind, teasing them back.

Robert's children knew his moods well. In quick succession, he could be stern and mischief-bent, angry and benevolent, greedy and fastidious, arrogant and gentle. He was also an inveterate maker of rules, and would blurt them out defiantly at table. He usually forgot them at once, as did his children. I always thought that it was Robert who first pronounced the rule that "poets shouldn't drive," for he said it to me often enough. When I reminded him of a poet he liked who had once driven a school bus for a living, he only smiled wryly.

Canelluñ sat in a considerable garden, which had to be watered morning and night, and secured against sheep that might stray in. The house looked out to sea, and from a wide hall it gave onto the living room and kitchen on one side and Robert's workroom on the other. I grew used to having him suddenly rise, unplug himself from the conversation, and cross the hall. He would sit at his worktable, dip a steel-nibbed pen into an inkwell, and go on from where he had left off, without forethought or hesitation. When he reached a stopping point, he might wander into the garden, taking his thinking with him; pass through the kitchen absent-mindedly; and return to the text. Quite soon, I realized that, apart from days of emergency or obligation, he wrote every day of his life, not on any strict schedule but whenever



"I'll want to run a few tests on you, just to cover my ass."



"Come on in, the water's fine."

a piece of time opened to him. When he wrote, he was detaching himself, composing himself, putting himself in order.

Graves kept away from machinery of any description; I never saw him touch a typewriter. In the thirties, he and Riding had come across a young German Jew whom they immediately took to. They taught him English, then offered him a job as secretary. He left Majorca with them, served in the Royal Navy in the Second World War, and afterward returned, with his family, to work again for Graves, living in a cottage by the entrance to the Canelluñ garden. His name was Karl Goldschmidt, but he had changed it in the Navy to Kenneth Gay. He had become, through many books, Graves's conscience: he was a meticulous copy-reader. Where Robert's time was concerned, he acted as watchdog, suspicious of strangers. After a morning's work, Robert would leave his handwritten pages for Karl, and they would be on his desk, immaculately typed, by late afternoon. He would then subject the text to another severe mauling. Eventually, the finished manuscript would be given to Castor, the mailman, when he came to work in the Canelluñ garden. To Robert, the mails were sacred. His mail would be left for him in the village café, and he would appear religiously at the same hour, open his letters, and, very often, share their contents with any friend who was there. He was also a prodigious letter writer; it was nothing for him to fill his inkwell and write some thirty letters in a day—to friends, to editors, to critics, to newspapers. He wrote me once, "Find a place where things are done by hand, and the mails are trustworthy." It may have been as well that he antedated the fax machine.

DEYÁ often seemed to me like the stage of an enormous natural amphitheatre, demanding from its new settlers some sacrifice, some drastic behavior—and, indeed, many dramas took place among those who alighted there, in some of which Robert played a part, inevitably, for he considered Deyá his village. It is the setting of many of his poems; it served as his vocabulary—the landscape his thought moved in. He approached new arrivals

with curiosity and diffidence. If he took to someone, he would often create, out of a few essential facts, a whole identity, holding it out to the newcomer as though it were a coat that had only to be slipped on to fit. Those who proved unwilling to have their essential selves thus reconstructed would have "let him down," and the coat would not be proffered again. These identities were fictions of his, fashioned to accommodate strangers into his orbit. In Deyá, he was an insistent Prospero.

During the fifties, the demands of school fees and other expenses kept Robert at his worktable. Late in 1954, he found that he had taken on more work than he could cope with, and he asked me if I would help him by doing a rough first translation of Suetonius' "The Twelve Caesars," for Penguin, while he himself translated Lucan's "Pharsalia." I went to work, and every so often Robert would appear, to talk and to check my progress. Ignoring the Latin, he would go over my latest pages, glasses cocked, pencil at the ready, humphing from time to time, leaving behind him an undergrowth of correction. I had done what I considered a finished version, so when he had gone I would pore over his corrections, for they were all improvements. Over that winter, I learned about writing English prose. The severity with which he corrected his own work he would apply equally to the writing of others—a habit that made him an impatient reader of his contemporaries. He became for me then the reader over my shoulder.

I also learned about the mysterious alchemy of translation. Robert was a first-rate classicist, and in the course of writing the two Claudius novels he had immersed himself in Roman history, but, much more than that, he would talk about life in Rome in the first century A.D. as easily as he would about life in, say, present-day London. In a sense, he had been there.

He decided that Suetonius was part gossip columnist, part obituarist, and had to be rendered in an appropriate English. Sometimes he took questionable liberties with an original text, as he did in his version of the Iliad. He could not always keep a rein on his impulse to improve and tidy up a text, even if it was not originally his. The one transla-

tion of his that he made into a true English masterpiece, however, is his version of Lucius Apuleius' "The Golden Ass." It was a text he deeply loved, and he so put on the original the spare clarity and cadence of his own prose that "The Golden Ass" more properly belongs among his own books—he made free with the text, for the sake of its English coherence. A good translator, he insisted, must have *nerve*. Nerve he had, in abundance. I had no idea then that I would turn to translation later in my life, but when I did I began to appreciate that brief apprenticeship, that gift of nerve.

DEYÁ remained quiet throughout the fifties, except for surges of summer visitors. Between books, Robert accepted invitations to write on a variety of subjects, and he took great pride in the swiftness and sureness with which he dispatched these tasks. Writing prose was a precise craft, he maintained, and a writer should be able to give matter of any kind the language it asked for. Robert also left his books behind him, quite literally. In 1956, he undertook to write a novel around the trial of Dr. William Palmer, a likable Victorian racegoer and rogue, on a charge of poisoning, for which he was hanged—unjustly, Graves thought. He brought from London all the books he would need as background to the period and set to work. It was as though William Palmer had come to stay in Canelluñ, in Robert's workroom, for Palmer usurped his conversation whenever he emerged. Robert worked on the book strenuously over a two-month period, and when it was finished, immaculately typed by Karl, the books were posted back to his London bookdealer, and William Palmer was never mentioned again.

Poetry, however, was an altogether different matter. Whenever he felt the nudge of a poem, he would put aside all else to make way for it. For him, poems were not just sudden pieces of writing: they were events. He subjected his poems to the same fierce scrutiny to which Laura had subjected them. He had a remarkable ear for the movement of a poem; even his lesser poems are

beautifully fashioned. He went through many poetic manners, and was adept in all of them, but latterly he took to suppressing in each new edition of his "Collected Poems" his earlier, crankier poems, in favor of his later muse-poems. Muse-poems were either poems he felt had come to him magically, written from inspiration rather than intent, or poems addressed to a muse—love poems, but love poems that recast love conflicts in the language and manner of myth, and in which the lovers themselves act out mythical patterns.

Madness and fear of madness loom often in his poems, at the opposite pole from his sturdy common sense. Yet the poems he considered inspired rather than contrived came from the beauty and terror of madness, of the irrational; some of his images he claimed he fully understood only years after writing them. The onset of such madness was what he always feared and longed for: it moved between dream and nightmare, between desire and revulsion: and it came infallibly from falling in love. In writing, however, common sense often had the last word:

For human nature, honest human nature
Knows its own miracle: not to go mad.

At that point, into his sixties, Graves occupied a singular and increasingly admired ground among his contemporaries. He had redefined the obligations of the poet, which he sustained by a body of mythological connection, a whole cosmography, and a poetic creed that was coherent and rooted in the past. Few other poets had fulfilled the poet's function with such grave dedication or had cast it in such a visionary light. Only Yeats, whom Graves chose to

despise, had sustained poetry with a mythology of his own devising, though one far less well informed and thorough than Graves's.

In workaday Deyá, I saw much of Robert, quite often with the children and Beryl, on Sunday picnics to the beach, and sometimes alone, in his workroom or at the café. I would question him about the past, about writers like Hardy, whom he had met, whom he could even imitate. He would try out on me the arguments in his current



writing, inviting criticism and disagreement, which he usually resisted stoutly, sometimes crossly. He was tigerish over matters of language: his dictionaries were thumbled and ink-stained. He could be infuriating, in his pigheadedness, his often wild misjudgments. His utter disregard for privacy caused trouble between us more than once: he would broadcast matter from close conversations, sometimes recklessly. Robert and I were, however, used to each other. It was difficult to register disagreement with Robert; he was used to sweeping people along with him. With close friends, he would concede differences of opinion, although he clearly viewed them as temporary aberrations. I was often an aberrant friend. In those years, he was writing steadily, even jauntily, enjoying in Deyá a kind of equilibrium that seemed as if it might go on and on, like the agrarian round.

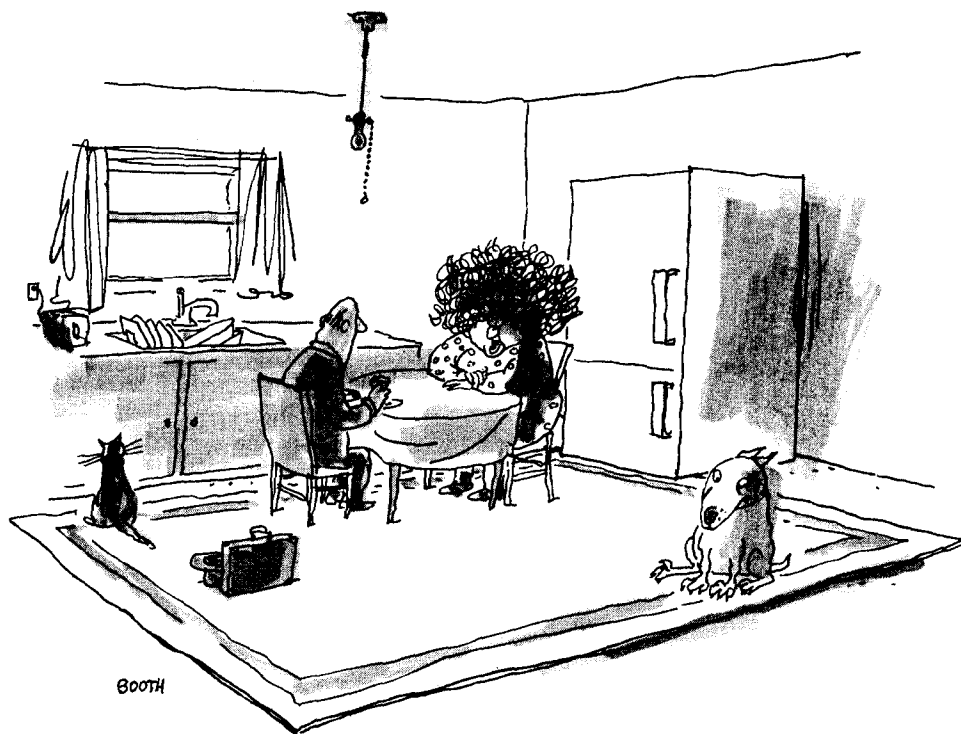
Every so often, word came his way that would give rise to what Beryl always referred to as "golden dreams." These stemmed from the time when Alexander Korda contracted to film "I, Claudius," in 1934, with Charles Laughton as Claudius. Bad luck dogged the film, and it was never finished; but Graves lived from then on in hope of another such windfall. What did come

was an invitation in 1956 to lecture in the United States. Graves had waved off such offers before, but money was now an important consideration, and we held a summit meeting, Robert, Beryl, and I, to talk it over. I had an apartment in New York which he could use as a base, and I promised Beryl that I would travel with him. The arrangements were made, and he set to work preparing three lectures. I went to New York ahead of him, and met him at Idlewild. He arrived somewhat warily; but, startled by the crowds that attended his first lecture, by the discovery that he had unsuspected legions of readers, he expanded, and decided to enjoy himself. Dealing with publishers and editors by mail, Graves generally struck his boxer stance. Meeting them at dinners in his honor, however, he turned benign, and answered questions with his oblique, teasing humor. He visited the *New Yorker* offices and agreed to write stories as well as poems for the magazine. At the Poetry Center of the Y.M.H.A., he lectured on "The White Goddess"—by far the most lucid summation he ever made of that "mad book," as he used to refer to it. He looked the very icon of a poet: magnificent head, crowned with gray curls; stoutly in his own skin; in full command of his flights of argument. In

the introduction to one lecture, he explained that on his last visit to America he had lost twenty pounds in weight and two thousand dollars, and that now, having regained the weight, he had come to make good his other loss. He teased his audiences with erudition; they went away spellbound, and bought his books. His visit made it clear to him that he need not worry about money, about the children's school fees: a number of his previous books were to appear in new editions; he had firm commitments for those in the works or in his sights; and there was enough talk of screenplays and movie rights to revive his "golden dreams." I had never seen Robert in front of an audience—it seemed to me that he thought only of readers, not of listeners—and was astonished, not just by his utter domination of his listeners but by his extraordinary lucidity. He sounded remarkably sane, but when he read his poems I realized that his mad self was merely lying in wait somewhere for him, and that he expected it and needed it.

Travelling, we replayed his lectures, sorting out the people he had met, paging through books he had been given, bountifully inscribed, and we continued to talk about poetry. Once, on the train from Boston to New Haven, he nudged me. About three rows away was a book face down on the arm of a seat, its owner asleep. It was "The Reader Over Your Shoulder." I had heard him tell, many times, a possibly apocryphal story about Arnold Bennett, who had carried in his wallet a five-pound note to give to the first person he found reading one of his books: on his death, the note was found, still folded, in his wallet. Graves waited until his reader awoke, and then he moved to an adjoining seat, introduced himself, told his Arnold Bennett story, signed the book, and gave his startled reader ten dollars, swearing he would claim it from his publisher.

We took long walks, in the Village, on the West Side piers. One night, he wanted to see the moon, which we found only after walking a few blocks; at that moment, Deyá



"I've decided to feed the dog soybeans."

was on his mind. Once, in the West Village, he stopped me and pointed: out of a sixth-floor window a horse's head was protruding. The building housed a police livery stable. One evening, returning home, he stopped, silent. After a while, he said, gruffly, "Don't much like that chap." "That chap" was Robert himself, at his previous night's lecture. He flew back to Europe, Beryl's shopping list ticked and executed, on a Pan American plane that carried Toscanini's coffin in the back of the cabin. He wrote me a letter from the plane, which arrived in an envelope bearing the legend "Fly with the stars the Pan American way." Robert had crossed out "stars" and written above it "dead."

That first trip was something of a coming out for Robert. Where he had previously been reluctant to leave Deyá except for obligatory holidays in England, he now accepted invitations to travel, to give lectures and readings, to write magazine articles, to be featured in a *Playboy* interview. On his travels, he made new friends, some of them in movie circles; Alec Guinness and Ava Gardner both visited him in Deyá. Later, in the sixties, he became something of a cult figure: "The White Goddess" was a source book for readers of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. The BBC came to Deyá to make a television film about him. The State University of New York at Buffalo was preparing to pay him handsomely for the scratched manuscripts he had saved in the attic of Canelluñ. His mail had become voluminous.

As I think of it, that first foray made Robert suddenly aware that he had not only a literary reputation but a public self—he could enthrall an intelligent audience by his wit, the easy way he displayed his great learning, his humor, his downrightness, his poetic intensity, and, of course, the elegance of his language. Clusters of people, many of them young, waited after his lectures to ask him questions or murmur some fervent homage to him. He had more

The impartial Law enrolled a name
For my especial use;
My rights in it would rest the same
Whether I puffed it into fame
Or drowned it in abuse.

Robert was what my parents guessed
When first they peered at me,
And *Graves* an honorable bequest,
With Georgian silver and the rest,
From my male ancestry.

They taught me: "You are *Robert Graves*
(Which you must learn to spell),
But see that *Robert Graves* behaves,
Whether with honest men or knaves,
Exemplarily well."

Then, though my I was always I,
Illegal and unknown,
With nothing to arrest it by—

MY NAME AND I

As will be obvious when I die
And *Robert Graves* lives on—

I cannot well repudiate
This noun, this natal star,
This gentlemanly self, this mate
So kindly forced on me by fate,
Time, and the registrar;

And therefore hurry him ahead
As an ambassador
To fetch me home my beer and bread
Or commandeer the best green bed,
As he has done before.

Yet, understand, I am not he
Either in mind or limb;
My name will take less thought for me,
In worlds of men I cannot see,
Than ever I for him.

—ROBERT GRAVES
(January 6, 1951)

than enough money, and could count on a handsome advance for any new book. He met celebrities who wanted to meet him, and, talking with students, he breathed in some of the early fervor of the sixties. His letters, which were usually full of the family, the garden, and the work in hand, now talked of famous visitors, movie options. His royalties could now make Canelluñ more comfortable, and buy Beryl a new Land Rover. Yet, on that first visit, he had been perfectly conscious that he was playing himself, reinforcing his eccentric image. I think that as he began to travel more he steadily lost that consciousness. Never exactly modest, he became increasingly arrogant, increasingly defiant in his views. The golden dreams, he was certain now, were real.

Change was coming precipitously to Spain at the same time, even to villages as far-flung as Deyá. Mass tourism changed the face of Spain, and was to sustain the Spanish economy into the eighties. Bottled gas replaced charcoal in the kitchen, cars and buses began to multiply on the roads, foreign newspapers appeared in the kiosks. The equilibrium that the village—and Robert—

had enjoyed throughout the fifties was suddenly over forever.

IN late 1958, I left Deyá, first to sail the Atlantic with some friends in a Nova Scotia schooner, then to remarry and settle in Madrid. I saw much less of Robert after that, but we still exchanged letters. Since I first came across Spain, I had become immersed in it, quite apart from Robert, for Robert's interest in Spain was distant; only his locality, Deyá, concerned him. I learned Spanish through those years, and I travelled all over Spain, looking and listening and reading. In 1960, *The New Yorker* published the first of a series of chronicles I wrote from Spain—anti-Franco, as were all but a few of the Spaniards I knew. Robert scolded me for writing it: it was impolite, he maintained, to criticize one's host. I found this attitude ridiculous, and said so. We stopped short of a serious falling out, but I came to realize that, inevitably, I was withdrawing from Robert's orbit.

Robert had always been ready to laugh at himself; now I felt he was losing his irony. He had grown deeply serious about the Goddess, and, more and more, he laid down her law. I had

always viewed the Goddess as a vast, embracing metaphor, and I thought Robert did, too, somewhere in his mind. I never believed in the Goddess, any more than I believed in a Christian God. I realized, however, that Robert did believe, insistently so, and that the belief sustained and justified him.

In late 1959, Robert underwent a prostate operation, in London, which had serious complications. He was found to have a rare blood condition and had to be given massive transfusions, which left him weak for months. To a number of people, his son William included, that trauma had much to do with increasingly irrational behavior on his part throughout the sixties. The allowances his friends made for him were exceeded by his growing insistence that he was somehow a spokesman for his times, that his long-held views were becoming generally accepted as the truth. It seemed to me when I met him later that year that he was losing all sense of the "otherness" of other people: now they had only to fit into his script.

In "The White Goddess," addressing the question of why so few poets continued to write throughout their life, Graves explains:

The reason is that something dies in the poet. Perhaps he has compromised his poetic integrity by valuing some range of experience or other—literary, religious, philosophical, dramatic, political or social—above the poetic. But perhaps also he has lost his sense of the White Goddess: the woman he took to be a Muse, or who was a Muse, turns into a domestic woman and would have him turn similarly into a domesticated man. Loyalty prevents him from parting company with her, especially if she is the mother of his children and is proud to be reckoned a good housewife; and as the Muse fades out, so does the poet. . . . The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual "other woman," and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years, because the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart.

In 1961, he began a poem, "Ruby and Amethyst," thus:

Two women: one as good as bread,
Bound to a sturdy husband.
Two women: one as rare as myrrh,
Bound only to herself.

In July of 1960, I went to visit him in Deyá briefly, for his birthday, with my wife and son. Robert as a baby had been touched on the head by Swinburne while being wheeled in his pram

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

Gray 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 gray hair, flying phrenetic;
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 pavilion.

—ROBERT GRAVES
(January 12, 1957)

on Wimbledon Common; I had Robert touch Jasper on the head, for continuity's sake. Robert was newly consumed by a letter from the agent William Morris, who had suggested that "The White Goddess" might make a singular film, and he had been asked to provide an outline, for which he had made notes. Would I take them and see what I could make of them? The notes were indeed fertile, even daring in places. Then he wrote me, once I was back in Madrid, that he had found the person who must play the White Goddess. He had also found a new muse.

She was Canadian by nationality, with a Greek father and an Irish mother, and she was called Margot Callas. Graves met her in Deyá during that summer of 1960, and was instantly entranced by her. She was intelligent, witty, highly intuitive, certainly beautiful, and it was not long before Robert was discovering a clutch of other qualities in her. It was not long, either, before new poems began to flow from him, and Margot occupied his whole mind. Once more, the Goddess had sent him a sign.

Not for the first time, or the last, Graves was captivated by what he pronounced firmly to be a manifestation of the Goddess. On each occasion, he became possessed, partly mad; on each occasion, he wrote, furiously,

poems, only poems. He would shower his muse with them, and with letters and tokens of faith. Beryl, who knew him best, accepted these muses with a calm that others found inexplicable: she had learned how necessary they were to him. As in his years with Laura, he would refuse to hear a word against his muse. Now, as high priest, as voice, he spoke for the Goddess: only he could interpret her wishes, her commands.

Toward the end of 1960, I had to go to New York briefly, and I went by way of London, where the Graves family had gone for a Christmas visit. Robert spoke only of Margot, obsessively, and gave me some letters and tokens to take to her in New York. I did not know then what that would mean.

I remember that snow was lying in the city when I arrived, and that I went first thing to *The New Yorker*, to turn in a piece. I spent ten days busily, made plans to sail back to Spain on the Leonardo da Vinci, and delivered Robert's tokens to Margot. She, too, was returning to Spain, and took a cabin on the same ship.

Inevitably, we talked during the voyage about Robert. She, too, was taken aback by the insistence in his redefinition of her. She had been given no say in the matter; in Robert's eyes, her

muse status required only her acquiescence, and her nature was anything but acquiescent. We talked of many things besides Robert, and during the voyage realities intervened: Margot and I fell precipitously in love. By the time we reached Spain, we were lost in each other, and had decided to leave behind our present lives. She made her way to Majorca, I to Madrid. A month later, we met up in France, and came to rest in a water mill in the French Basque country. Robert was not on my mind.

I had not thought what his reaction might be, but I could not have imagined its ferocity. Margot came in for no criticism: the Goddess had swung her axe, as predicted. I came in for all his rage. She was no longer muse, I no longer poet. The poems that followed our desertion claimed the next section of the "Collected Poems." It was not until later that I saw this as a pattern that had arisen several times before. In the mythic pattern of "The White Goddess" the poet succumbs to the rival as the inevitable death-in-love that he must undergo; in reality, however, the rival became the arch-betrayer. Robert, in those slowly declining years, came to see his reality wholly in terms of mythic inevitability; and the myth was his alone.

We never spoke again, Robert and I. Over the years, Margot and I had many meetings and partings. I would hear of Robert occasionally, for I still saw friends we had in common. New settlers had flocked to Deyá, and land was being snapped up, houses were being built. It had grown too busy to be any longer Robert's village. The Goddess proved ever more insistent: a new muse had manifested herself, and Robert was once more writing poems—muse-poems.

When his "Complete Poems" are published, I think they will reveal that in his strongest poems Robert is less a love poet than a poet of opposition and contradiction, of two-mindedness, much more questioner than worshipper. His muse-poems, finely wrought and tense as they are, all follow the same single-minded plot. Some read like imitations of

him—perhaps because the muses he chose latterly were more and more his own creations. The stance he struck became ever more adamant, even shrill. I think he had stopped listening—to those close to him, to his own common-sense self, even to his own misgivings.

Of the thousand-odd poems that Robert wrote, I can think of eleven that are sufficiently strong and singular as to belong unquestionably to the canon of English poetry. That may seem meagre; but what most distinguishes him as a poet, I think, is how he chose to live, his dedication to the office of poet. In the first chapter of "The White Goddess," he wrote:

Since the age of fifteen 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.

That remained his measure, all his long life.

Robert's vindictiveness toward me did not reach me except by rumor, and there I was hurt mostly by its untruths. I felt for Beryl, but she was wisest in Robert's ways, and, giving him the room he needed, she allowed him his follies, whether wishful or actual. I had my own work to do, and I continued to

do it, just as Robert would have. I realized then, as I do now, that many of my writing habits I absorbed from him, like the sanctity of the writing table, which I set up wherever I am. I remain attached to village life and to the agricultural round. When Margot and I first parted, I bought a small house on the edge of a Spanish mountain village, and spent every summer there with my son Jasper. For the last ten years, I have gone every winter to the Dominican Republic, where I have a house above the sea, and where, boned to essentials, the days simplify and slow down, as they did in Deyá. I revise what I write, scrupulously. I still bow nine times to the new moon; and I still read his poems, or listen to them in my head.

In the spring of 1985, I made a brief visit to Spain, with Margot, to visit Deyá, to see Beryl and some of the children, and to take farewell of Robert. His mind and memory had been failing steadily, and now he lay on a cot in the room adjoining his workroom, dozing, silent, beyond communication. It was as though he had gone into one of his trances and had not returned from it. At one moment, however, his eyes opened and widened; and it seemed to me that in them still lay all the wisdom and mischief in the world. ♦



"I'm sorry, Ms. Greer, but I can't function under this kind of scrutiny."