THE POETRY OF ROBERT GRAVES FROM THE WAR TO *THE WHITE GODDESS*

Lucia GRAVES

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
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 has 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 brigh bolt may fall.

(«The White Goddess»[1])

This supremely feminine being is Robert Graves' White Goddess, the product of both rigorous historical research and an extraordinary show of poetic intuition. She became the central figure around which his poetic forces rallied in mid-life, when he was at the peak of his intellectual and creative evolution, and filled the void left by his dissatisfaction with the society in which he lived. She stood shining at the end of a long and tortuous path, and made sense not only of his own past, but of human behaviour as a whole. And she set the course he was to follow during the next three or four decades, until his literary production came to an end.

It is therefore very helpful, if we are to assess the development of Graves' poetry from his earliest days as a war poet, to his establishment as one of the finest love poets in the English language of our century, to take a look at the main elements of this historical-cum-literary thesis that exerted such an influence on him.

During the historical research for his novel *The Golden Fleece*—the story of Jason and the Argonauts— Graves, forever concerned with the nature of poetry and its origins, became fascinated by the development of religious thought in the ancient world, well aware that «it is a commonplace of history that what happens on earth gets reflected in theological dogma.» But his research suddenly took a swing in another direction when he casually came across an ancient Welsh minstrel poem called *The Song of Taliesin*. This poem, hitherto considered a nonsense rhyme, gave Graves the clue of the survival among Celtic bards of the same pre-historic Goddess cult he was beginning to detect in his exploration of the ancient Greek legends. The result of that first intuitive discovery was a whole chain of interconnected discoveries, related to ancient calendars, alphabets, rituals, myths and iconology, which became the body of his book *The White Goddess*.

In this book, which Graves subtitles «A historical grammar of poetic myth,» Graves expounds, through a comparative study of Western mythologies, his conviction that the Western world, from Mesopotamia to the British isles, and across all the Mediterranean countries, was once ruled by a feminine deity, the Lunar Muse-Goddess, or White Goddess, mother of all beings, whose triple condition of maiden, mother and crone, was symbolized by the three phases of the moon. Being in close touch with the magical aspect of life and the mysterious forces of nature, she was the source of all learning and the inspirer of all the arts. But matriarchy gave way to patriarchy, and with the introduction of the Olympic religious system she was eventually dispossessed by Apollo, the Greek God of Logic and Reason, who still governs the world today.

However, as Graves has proved with his conclusive interpretation of «The Song of Taliesin» and of other Mediaeval Celtic verses, the goddess cult

persisted, despite its suppression on an official level, well into the Middle Ages, and has left its mark in many aspects of our own culture: in folklore (take, for instance, folk tales such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs), agricultural feasts and customs, and, of course, in the cult of the Virgin Mary. Even more important for the poet Graves, English poetry abounds with traces of her influence throughout the centuries —he mentions Shakespeare, Donne, John Clare, Keats and Coleridge as examples of poets who undoubtedly felt her presence— and she still prevails today among all «true» poets, that is, among all poets inspired by a personal muse, who embodies the spirit of the ancient goddess. Only true poets, says Graves, through their experience of the Goddess, in both her cruel and loving aspects, are still in touch with the ancient forces of inspiration, magic and intuition. This is expressed in the poet's imagery and choice of words, each word being a live component of the poem.

This general view led Graves to distinguish between devotees of Apollo and those of the Muse, between Apollonian poetry and Muse poetry. The first, whose poems are composed in the forepart of the mind, with the help of wit, reason, a close knowledge of rhetoric, Classical example and contemporary fashion, can write on just about any subject: politics, philosophy, anything. But muse poets have «a single, infinitely variable theme,» and that is love. Consciously or unconsciously, according to Graves, all true poets interpret their emotions as part of this cyclic theme, which is the emotional counterpart of the fixed cycles of nature and agriculture. This theme, which Graves has found repeated again and again in the different mythologies that form the basis of Western culture, is a dramatized account of the Goddess's power over nature and over man, and of how man repeatedly clashes with his rival in love for her, his other self.

«The theme, briefly,» says Graves, «is the antique story, which falls into thirteen chapters and an epilogue, of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird. All true poetry celebrates some incident or scene in this very ancient story, and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial inheritance that they not only assert themselves in poetry but recur on occasions of emotional stress in the form of dreams, paranoiac visions and delusions.»[2]

In the figure of the White Goddess Graves found an explanation for his life-long fascination for the irrational elements of life, for the mysterious, the grotesque and even the cruel; an explanation, also, for his stubborn alienation

from established attitudes to life and poetry, and from the patriarchal society in which he was educated.

But how did his life lead up to this, and in what way did his poetry reflect his continual, though not always direct, approach to the White Goddess?

Born in Wimbledon, London, in 1895, Robert was the son of Alfred Perceval Graves, of Anglo-Irish origin, himself a minor poet, and of Amy Von Ranke, of German origin. He had a typically Edwardian education, supported by strict moral and religious views, but with enough love and comfort to make him a happy child, at least while he could observe the world from behind the curtains of the nursery window. For his mother, who exercised a dominant influence over her children, gave Robert a picture of the world as it should be, according to her Victorian ideals, not as it really was. His first painful experience with the harsh reality of the outside world occurred when he was sent to Charterhouse, a boys' public school, for working too hard and for having a German middle name. He braced himself, learned to box and took up mountain climbing, but behind that show of courage, his sensitive nature also forced him to become aware of his individuality and strong poetic vocation. Already in «The Mountain Side at Evening,» written when he was fifteen and published in the school magazine, we see him using poetry to voice his natural fears.

The Mountain Side at Evening

Now even falls
And fresh, cold breezes blow
Adown the grey-green mountain side
Strewn with rough boulders. Soft and low
Night speaks, her tongue untied
Darkness to Darkness calls.

'Tis now men say
From rugged piles of stones
Steal Shapes and Things that should be still
Green terror ripples though our bones,
Our inmost heart-strings thrill
And yearn for careless day

But a much worse experience with reality, one that no mother could have prepared him for, was of course the First World War, into which he entered as a volunteer with his inherited set of values, with his patriotism and righteousness, and even, perhaps, with a childish desire to come close to danger and fear. When

the war broke out in August 1914, Graves had just left school. He was nineteen and his main concern in life was to write poetry. A few months later, he had been sent out to fight in the front and was soon to rise to the rank of captain. He took part in the Somme offensive and on July 20th 1916 was seriously wounded and reported dead. But to everybody's surprise he survived and was sent back to England, where he recovered. It was in fact as a war poet that Robert Graves first made a name for himself. He was part of the war-poetry boom that had been detonated by Rupert Brooke's death in 1915. These war poems, which he later rejected, partly in an effort to forget the horror of the war, but principally because he did not think they had been written for what he considered to be truly poetic reasons, can be seen moving from the initial patriotic youthful verses, to desperate cries of indignation when he began to grasp the reality of the holocaust. His poetry became once again a refuge, this time against despair, the falling apart of a world, the loss of religious faith, and above all, the loss of friends in battle. We come across images either of the lost peace and security of childhood or of a future which he imagines equally comforting.

Over the Brazier (fragment)

What life to lead and where to go
After the War, after the War?
We'd often talked this way before,
But I still see the brazier glow
That April night, still feel the smoke
And stifling pungency of burning coke.

I'd thought: 'A cottage in the hills,
North Wales, a cottage full of books,
Pictures and brass and cosy nooks
And comfortable broad window-sills,
Flowers in the garden, walls all white.
I'd live there peacefully and dream and write'.

But when the war was over and the survivor came home, that spiritual peace was hard to find.

The Survivor Comes Home

Despair and doubt in the blood:
Autumn, a smell rotten-sweet:
What stirs in the drenching wood?

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

Nothing stirs, nothing cries.
Run weasel, cry bird for me,
Comfort my ears, soothe my eyes!
Horror on ground, over tree!
Nothing calls, nothing flies.

Once in a blasted wood,
A shrieking fevered noise
We jeered at Death where he stood:
I jeered, I too had a taste
Of death in the wood.

Am I alive and the rest
Dead, all dead? Sweet friends
With the sun they have journeyed west;
For me now night never ends,
A night without rest.

Death, your revenge is ripe.
Spare me! but can death spare?
Must I leap, howl to your pipe
Because I denied you there?
Your vengeance is ripe.

Death, ay, terror of Death
If I laughed at you, scorned you now
You flash in my eyes, choke my breath
'Safe home'. Safe? Twig and bough
Drip, drip, drip with Death!

What had survived was the body, but the soul was still in great danger. Graves, like many other returning soldiers, was to suffer terribly from shell shock. Shell shock became his personal war, a state of anguish which dominated his thoughts, and turned his life into a never ending nightmare. He could only pose questions, not answer them. What has happened to my world, to the things I once believed in? And, above all, who am I? But from these very questions a ghostly figure emerges. He is the forerunner of the mythical king's rival: his other self. We first encounter him in the «Letter from Wales,» a letter in verse Graves wrote to his fellow poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon, a long poem which begins «This is a

question of identity which I can't answer» and in which he wonders whether perhaps he did die in battle, and whether his friend Siegfried did not also die in France, both being subsequently supplanted by others. How is he to know he and Siegfried are the same men who were out in the muddy trenches? And again, we find him in «The Pier-Glass,» a poem about a man who looks at himself in a mirror in a large abandoned manor house, abandoned even by rats and insects. It is a poem which depicts his state of mind, the terrible emptiness in his heart. The house is no doubt a symbol of his past, of the lofty values and traditions of his childhood that are now destroyed and abandoned. He is here both the man looking at the mirror, and the man's reflection.

Is there no life, nothing but the thin shadow
And blank foreboding, never a wainscot rat
Rasping a crust? Or at the window pane
No fly, no bluebottle, no starveling spider?
The windows frame a prospect of cold skies
Half-merged with sea, as at the first creation,
Abstract, confusing welter. Face about,
Peer rather in the glass once more, take note
Of self, the grey lips and long hair dishevelled,
Sleep-staring eyes. Ah, mirror for Christ's love
Give me one token that there still abides
Remote, beyond this island mystery
So be it only this side Hope, somewhere,
In streams, on sun-warm mountain pasturage,
True life, natural breath: not this phantasma.

(«The Pier-Glass,» fragment)

In the White Goddess myth, the King has a rival, his other self. But the goddess is also of a double nature. On the one hand she is benevolent, loving, maternal. On the other side she is the executioner, the cruel hag at whose hands the king must die. She is both terrifying and enchanting, and the poet is required to accept both aspects and reconcile the two opposites. As early as 1920, we find Graves exploring this baffling duality of life as a poetic question. I am referring to a poem called «The God Called Poetry» in which poetry is symbolized by a double-headed god:

Then speaking from his double head
The glorious monster said
'I am YES and I am NO,

Black as pitch and white as snow,
Love me, hate me, reconcile
Hate with love, perfect with vile,
So equal justice shall be done
And life shared between moon and sun.
Nature for you shall curse or smile:
A poet you shall be, my son'.

(«The God Called Poetry,» fragment)

Shell shock was followed closely by disenchantment with the society for which he had fought, and he struggled through those post-war years, desperately trying to accomodate himself to life again by means of an early marriage —to Nancy Nicholson, an artist and ardent feminist. They had four children in quick succession, and much of his poetry of that period reflects his involvement in their lives: poems written for children, or using children as their main theme, encased in traditional folk metre and rhyme. But his confrontation with the crude reality of his disenchantment made him all the more determined to reject half-measures and half-truths and search only for what whole truths his poetic mind could unearth in that scene of desolation. As a result, his poems continued to reflect his dark mood and state of anguish without really giving him any answers. Emotional exhaustion did not even allow him the relief of irony. And yet, his obsession for writing good poetry was such, that he decided against psychiatric help for fear that he might lose his poetic powers during the process of psychiatric analysis.

What is interesting about Robert Graves' post war crisis is that although he was implicitly acknowledging that the religion, morals and ideals bequeathed by his forefathers had lost their meaning, and that this irrelevancy had affected whole areas of his culture, he did not, like so many other contemporary poets, reject the traditional forms of poetry, and turn to the freer modernist forms. On the contrary, he seemed obsessed with the idea of preserving traditional structures and perfecting them, for he recognized their value —and always would— as one of the few that had survived the transformation of his world. In the process he became an absolute master of his trade, a highly skilled craftsman in his use of words, rhyme and metre. He strove for originality only in his attitude toward his subject matter, not in linguistic experiments, and kept away from new poetic trends and avant-guard literary circles, even though he was thereby rapidly losing what had been a considerable initial success as a poet. The following poem, written at this time, sounds almost like a folk song in its metre, in its sad but simple resignation of the acceptance of lost love. But the images of the moon —the «tyrannous queen»— the «marble statues,» the «bergs of glinting ice,» and

indeed, all the imagery of the last two verses, are already pointing towards the White Goddess:

Full Moon

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 exorcised 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.

It was at this point, when Graves was voicing his confusion in poems full of surrealistic images of nightmares, or looking back at his nursery days in the more traditionally cut poems, that he met the American poet Laura Riding. Their ensuing literary and personal association provoked a definite break with a world to which he knew he no longer belonged. Not only did his marriage break up, but Graves wrote his autobiography *Goodbye to All That*, a passionate but dry account of his experiences in the war, through which he hoped at last to rid himself of his neurosis. Riding was a strong and dominant woman, and with enough intellectual capacity to excite Graves' intellect into new action. Here was the fresh voice of the American continent, a continent which had not suffered the direct wound of the war the way Europe had. Riding was detached enough from those events to be able to concern herself with the more eternal philosophical questions on the meaning of life. For her History had ended, and Time did not exist. This coincided with Graves' own search for the eternal values of life, and helped him reinforce his desire to escape from the nightmarish trap he was caught in at the time. And so. in 1929, after the publication of his autobiography, Graves left England with Laura Riding and together they settled on the island of Mallorca, where they spent the next seven years. During those years, his poetry reflects a growing fascination with the nature of woman, and with the relationship between the sexes. It also reveals a growing awareness that there is something wrong with this relationship in our present world, anticipating his later belief that «the political and social confusion of these last 3,000 years has been entirely due to man's revolt against woman as a priestess of natural magic, and his defeat of her wisdom by the use of intellect.»

Biographers and critics have remarked on the fact that Riding herself was the foreshadow of the White Goddess, and that Graves found an explanation, if not an acceptance, of her often harsh behaviour towards him, in the merciless aspect of the White Goddess —the crone, the witch, the layer-out. Here are two contrasting poems, written about this time, in which we are able to perceive, through the poet's eyes, these two opposing aspects of woman. And it is interesting to note how both poems confer on the woman described the powers and attributes of divinity.

On Portents

If strange things happen where she is,
So that men say that graves open
And the dead walk, or that futurity
Becomes a womb and the unborn are shed,
Such portents are not to be wondered at,

Being tourbillions in Time made
By the strong pulling of her bladed mind
Through that ever-reluctant element.

Like Snow

She, then, like snow in 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 the fingers feared,
And to soil friendly;
Holding the histories of the night
In yet unmelted tracks.

Between the hasty departure from Mallorca at the onset of the Spanish Civil war, and the publication of *The White Goddess* in 1948, two events of prime importance occurred in the life of Robert Graves. The first was the final and painful break with Laura Riding when she left him for another man and repudiated all her poetry. As Graves put it in a letter to Gertrude Stein, «the spirit left her and she became common clay, an average American divorcée-remarried housewife.» The other event was the rediscovery of love through my mother, Beryl, which brought with it a revival of his poetic powers. It was then, and only then, that he knew he had regained his lost vision of peace:

Mid-winter Waking

Stirring suddenly from long hibernation,
I knew myself once more a poet
Guarded by timeless principalities
Against the worm of death, this hillside haunting;
And presently dared open both my eyes.

O gracious, lofty, shone against from under,
Back-of-the-mind-far clouds like towers;
And you, sudden warm airs that blow
Before the expected season of new blossom,
While sheep still gnaw at roots and lambless go—

Be witness that on waking, this mid-winter,
I found her hand in mine laid closely
Who shall watch out the Spring with me.
We stared in silence all around us
But found no winter anywhere to see.

From this time on Robert Graves channelled all his energies into the exploration of the White Goddess myth through his personal experiences. The only poetry not directly concerned with it are the humorous or satirical verses, to which he had always dedicated part of his energies, finding in them a useful relief from the seriousness of his task. But otherwise he continued writing chiefly love poetry to the end of his active life.

The creative process of a poem was an experience that Graves found almost painful. «The art of poetry,» he said, «consists in taking a poem through draft after draft, without losing its inspirational magic.» To end this paper I think it would be interesting to take a glimpse of the poet at work. For that I have chosen one of his last poems, «Advent of Summer,» written in July 1974, at the age of seventy-nine.[3] I have chosen it partly because it strikes one as unusual within the general line of his poems from this period, which are mostly straightforward love poems celebrating joy or unhappiness in his role of poet-lover. «Advent of Summer» is addressed not to the loved one, but to himself, to the familiar other self. As we look through the drafts we will notice that this is not made clear from the start and it is only in the fifth draft that the «fellow poet» makes his appearance in the very first line. Again it is interesting how the figure of the other poet, his *alter ego*, becomes more and more precisely described.

In the first draft we read «You are my fellow poet»; in the second a state of mind is added: «You are lonely, my poet.» In the third we see «You are lonely, dear (crossed out), old (crossed out), shy poet.» In the fourth draft he is «poor poet,» in the fifth «honest poet,» then «You have always been lonely my fellow poet,» moving on to «You have always been lonely my grey fellow poet» —the adjective «grey» leaving us with no doubt as to who the fellow poet is. The final version reads «You have lived long but over lonely, / My grey-haired fellow poet.» The other idea one sees changing through the drafts is the description of the «cold showery summer,» which seems to be what originated the poem. In some drafts it is a showery summer, in others a rainless June. The important point, we see as the poem moves on, is that this is not the sort of summer one is used to, not a true summer, in fact. To start with, he is telling himself not to be saddened by this cold summer, «Let us flout the unkindness of a cold rainless June»; «Forget all the cruelties of this unlovely summer.» Then «Forget the absurdities of so untrue a summer.» But at this point, in the seventh draft, he

changes to «Let us deny the absurdities of every summer,» and finally, «Let us deny the absurdities of every true summer.» So in the last drafts he has moved from a particular summer, a cold and unusual one, to all summers. All summers, he is saying on reflection, are equally true, and so equally absurd: either from too much life or from too little. The white-haired poet has seen plenty of them, and prefers to listen to the song of the simple thrushes.

The title changes from «Summer '74,» to «One Last Poem,» to «Summer» to «A New Poem» and then to the final «Advent of Summer.»

Other changes are more for sound and rhythm than for concept: like the «apples» that change to «apricots» and back to «apples.»

Here is the final version:

Advent of Summer

You have lived long but over-lonely,
My grey-haired fellow-poet
Sighing for new melodies
In face of sullen grief,
With wanings of old friendship,
With sullen repetition —
For who can thrive in loneliness,
Accepting its cold needs?

Let love dawn with the advent
Of a cool, showery summer
With no firm, fallen apricots
Nor pods on any beanstalk,
Nor strawberries in blossom,
Nor cherries on the boughs.

Let us deny the absurdities
Of every true summer:
Let us never live ill-used
Or derided by new strangers;
Let us praise the vagrant thrushes
And listen to their songs.

* * *

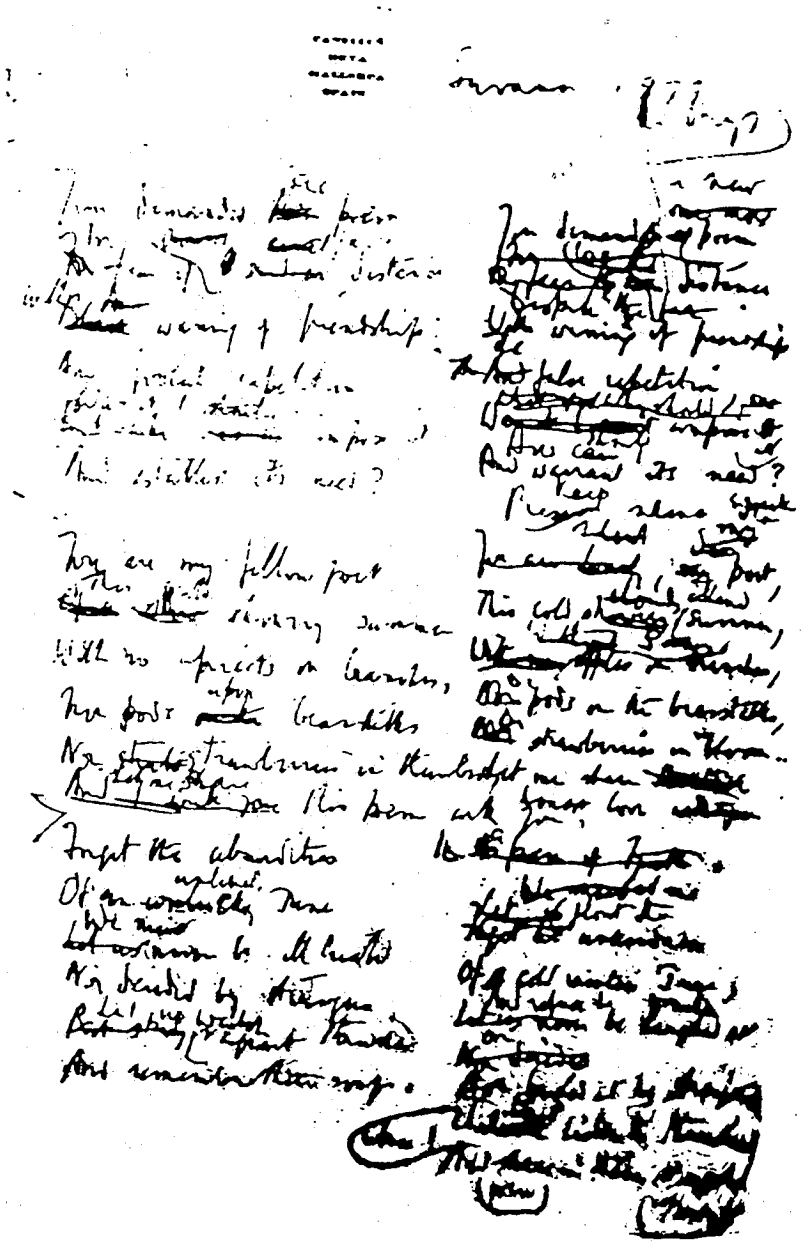
In Robert Graves the poet and the man were inextricably united. For him poetry was «not a department of literature but a way of being and thinking.» And this was obvious to all who knew him. Whatever activity he undertook when he was

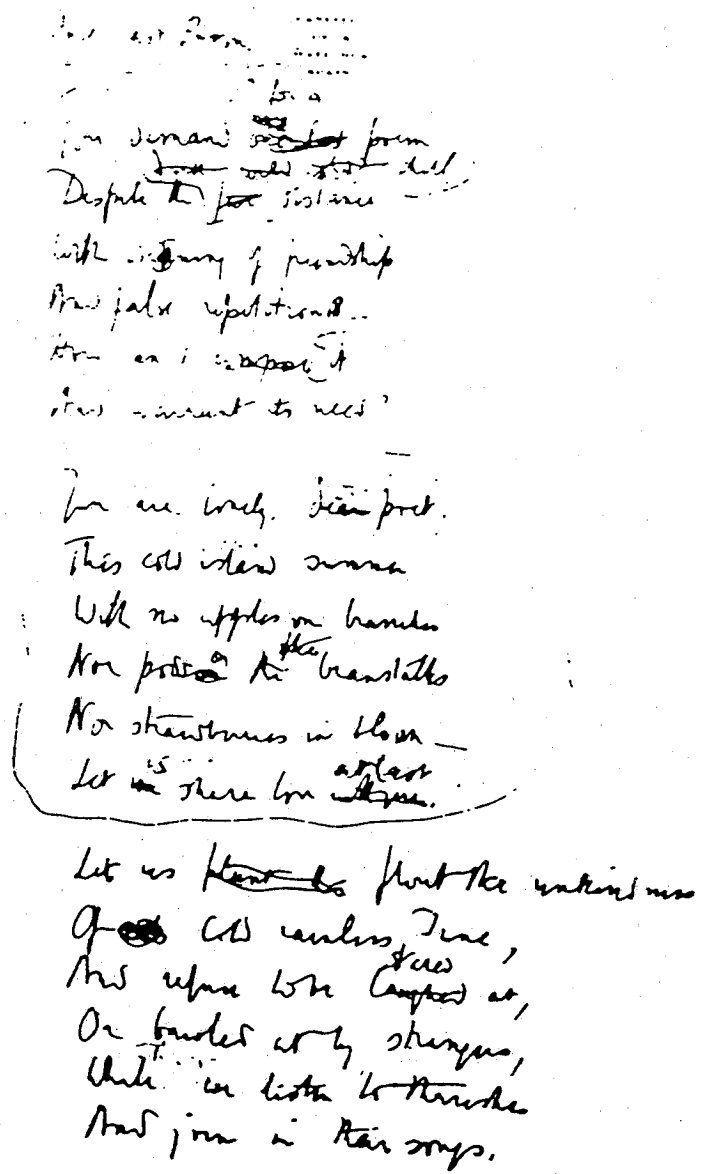
not actually writing poetry, whether as a scholar, novelist, or simply as a family man, he remained obsessively loyal to his poetic principles. I can therefore find no better way to conclude this paper than by quoting these words of his:

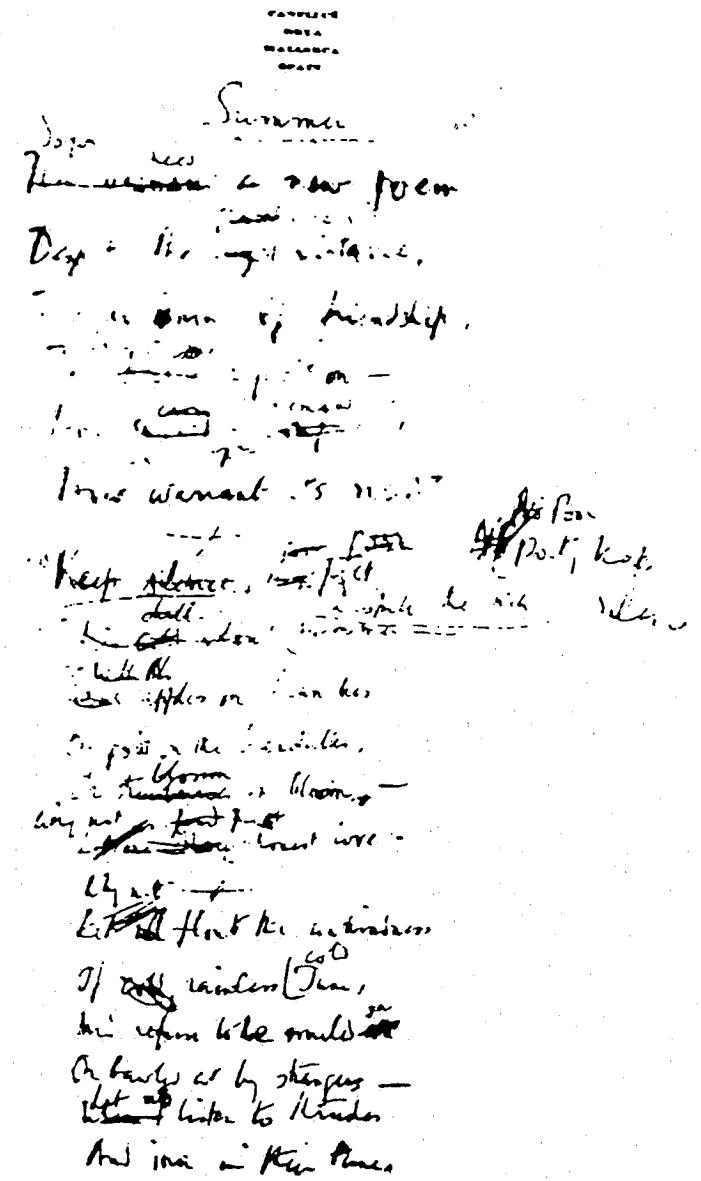
> A continuous sense of gratitude at being alive, and in love, and having no grudge against practical circumstances —if only because of having obstinately avoided being enslaved by them— may imply that the dedicated poet has been constantly wounded and bruised by attempting the impossible. Will his poems then figure as durable records of blessedness, or will they do no more than convey, truthfully, the darkness of his self-deception? This seems to me a philosophical, and therefore irrelevant question. A poet's destiny is to love.

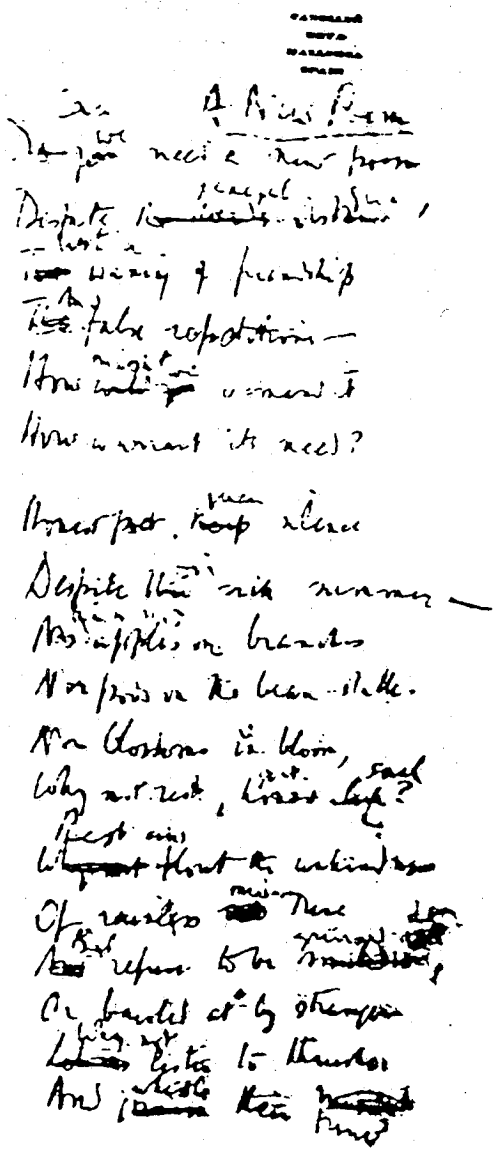
NOTES

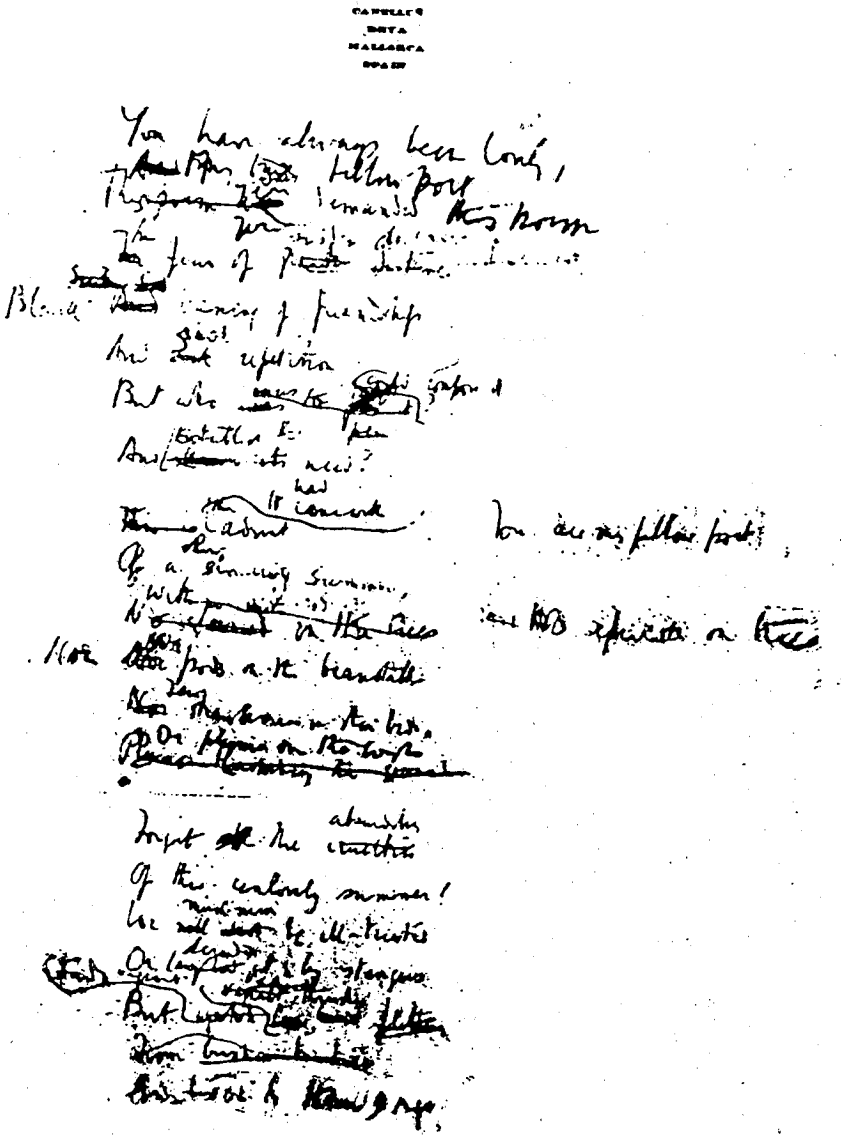
1. The copyright of all texts of Robert Graves quoted in the paper belongs to the Trustees of the Robert Graves Copyright Trust.
2. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber), 24.
3. Mss reproduced by kind permission of the Eton School Library. (Mss included as an appendix to this article — Ed.).











You have always been lonely,
My grey fellow poet,
You demand a new form
In place of sudden distance,
Black weaving of friendship
And sad repetition —
But who could provide it
And measure the need?
That must come with the advent
Of a show showery summer —
No apricots on trees,
No pods on the beanstalks,
No strawberries in blossom
No plums on the boughs.

//

Forget the absurdities
Of so untrue a summer:
Let us never be ill-used
Or derided by strangers
But listen to the rapacious thunder
And listen to their songs.

Advent of Summer

You have always been lonely,
My grey fellow poet
Demanding a new form
In place of sudden distance,
All black weaving of friendship
And sad repetition —
But who can provide it
Or accept the need?

//

That must come with the advent
Of a showery summer —
No apricots on trees,
No pods on beanstalks,
No strawberries in blossom,
No cherries on the boughs.

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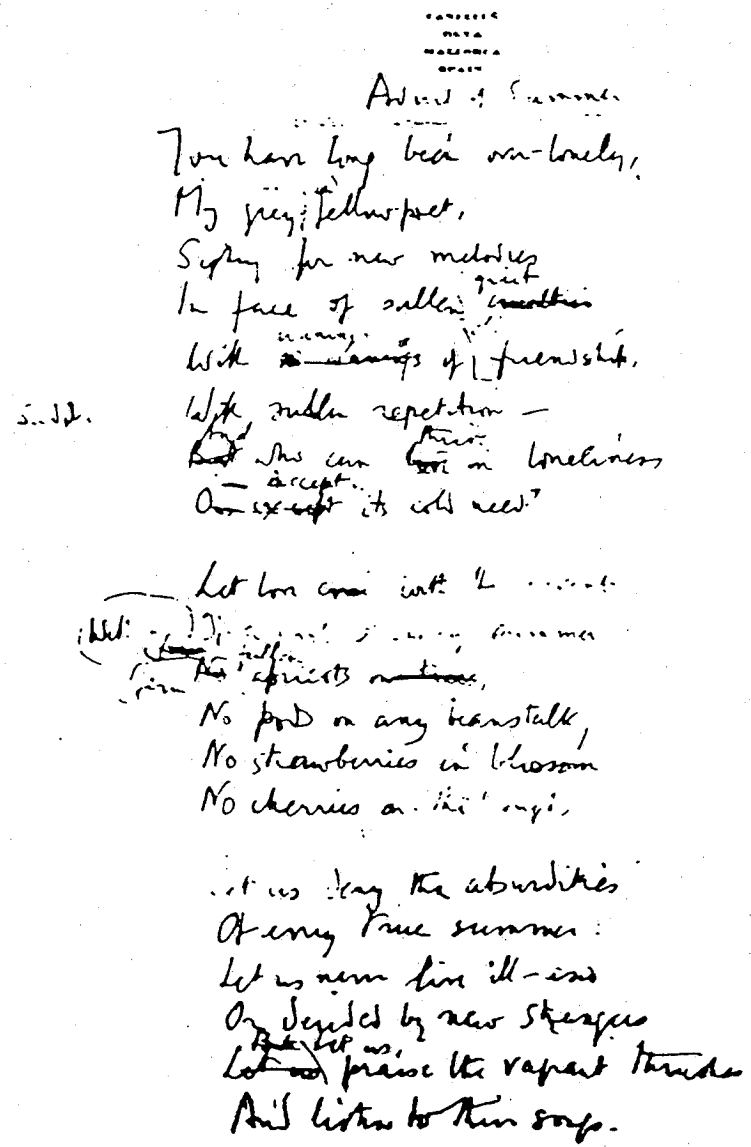

ADVENT OF SUMMER

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Sighing for new melodies
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Deyá
July
1924