

Great War, White Goddess: Mythopoetics of Shell Shock in Robert Graves's *The Anger of Achilles*

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A man, perhaps an author or persona or hero, experiences an event or series of events through which he symbolically dies, suffers deeply or at least recognizes the miseries of a dichotomous world. Fortunately he carries with him abilities which allow him to endure, to 'accommodate' his stricken condition. But his ultimate struggle, his vision, is to assert himself, to remake his world, perhaps to realize a mystical or religious rejuvenation, and not just to be 'reborn', but more significantly, to be 'transfigured'.

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London, 1975), pp. 10-11.

Robert Graves's reputation as a War Poet has been a matter of some debate. Unswervingly committed to his regiment, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, he is described in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) – under the pseudonym David Cromlech – as having 'no use for anti-war idealism' and a strong sense of 'the regimental tradition,' but also, significantly, 'a first-rate nose for anything nasty.'¹ As such, Graves's war poetry lacks the bitter profundity of, for example, Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' (1917) or Sassoon's 'To Any Dead Officer' (1918). We find no dwelling on empty glory in Graves's poetry, no immediacy of loss; and, therefore, we are rarely moved. But if the trenches of World War I fashioned Owen and Sassoon into canonical War Poets, it could equally be said that they forged Graves into a poet who wrote about the traumatic *experience* of war, a phenomenon which is never truly consigned to the past. Profoundly shell-shocked following his front-line service, Graves writes about war in a singular fashion.

Today, we understand Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a response, often following a period of latency, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive visions, nightmares, or behaviours stemming from that event. Until the originary traumatic event is narrated, and thus translated into narrative memory, history becomes displaced; it remains ineluctable, and the traumatic symptoms continue to intrude. These are the very features which mark Graves's post-war writing. Unwilling

¹ Siegfried Sassoon, *The Memoirs of George Sherston: Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, Sherston's Progress* (Garden City, N.Y.: Literary Guild of America, 1937), p. 148.

(even unable) to narrate the abject symbolism of the trenches and risk undermining the sacrifices of the men who fought and died under his command, trauma – Sassoon’s ‘nastiness’ – *became* Graves’s aesthetic, and his post-war writing is steeped in terror, hauntings and images that threaten reason. Every aspect of his oeuvre is shaped by it, including his prodigious grammar of poetic myth, *The White Goddess* (1948), and his translation of Homer’s *Iliad*, *The Anger of Achilles* (1959).

For Harold Bloom, the defining aspect of Graves’s later prose is his ‘curious literalism’, an aspect which, he argues, paradoxically constitutes both the weakness (the ‘tendentious mythmaking’ of *The White Goddess*) and strength (the persuasive vitality of *King Jesus* [1946]) of his work.² This ‘literalism’ pervades Graves’s translation of the *Iliad*, making it a somewhat jarring read. The survival of a classical text, charges Frank Kermode, depends ‘upon its possession of a surplus of signifier’.³ It must always signify more than any one translator, or interpreter, can glean from it. Rich in hermeneutic possibility, classical texts resist literalistic, monovalent readings, and thus translations that lack the sense of nuance – be it stylistic or figurative – that reflects and enables this plurisignification tend to become removed from the original texts, emerging as sites of estrangement and absence. As with the Gravesian material that precedes it, however *The Anger of Achilles* is significantly shaped by Graves’s own experiences, personal myth, and critical preoccupations. It can therefore be read with greater understanding if we approach it not simply as a literary anomaly (as numerous critics have), but as a refraction of his own experience of trauma. As such, this paper will trace the scars of Graves’s neurasthenia from the battlefields of the Somme to Troy’s Skamandrian Plain, adumbrating the traumatic dynamics at work in his intervening war poetry and *The White Goddess*, in an attempt to situate *The Anger of Achilles* within the corpus of his war writing. I will argue that, in *Anger*, Graves produces a version of this archetypal war poem which is not only marked by his own trauma, but – by drawing on Graves’s conception of the Goddess as arecuperative power – strives towards a moment of psychological reconciliation by shaping the Iliadic narrative to the contours of her myth.

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In ‘Graves and the White Goddess’ (1956) Randall Jarrell cites an extensive list of post-war poems that constitute evidence enough, he avers, ‘to make any reader decide that

² Harold Bloom, *Poets and Poems* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), p. 304.

³ Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change*, rev. edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 117.

Graves is a man to whom terrible things have happened'.⁴ Without these traumas, encompassing two world wars and his pernicious relationship with the poet Laura Riding, we must imagine that both his work and the mythopoetic system that informs it would be immeasurably different. By relentlessly pursuing a resolution, through art, to the psychic fragmentation wrought by traumatic experience, Graves has attempted to give expression to those forces that are both inexplicable and beyond his power to control. What differentiates Graves's pursuit of recovery from that of his fellow soldier-poets is his idiosyncratic response to those forms of experience rooted in the irrational which are the *product* of trauma, a response which manifests itself in a mythic, matriarchal vision of the universe that would ultimately inform the totality of his work.

When we approach Graves's poetry, prose and translations with this in mind, it becomes apparent that the trauma Graves underwent at the Somme enabled him to depart the confines of Aristotelian reason and empirical referentiality: it opened, in Frank Kersnowski's words, 'a door into the unconscious, [and] what Graves found within made unusual sense of what was without: love, passion, violence, unpredictability.'⁵ Like Joseph Campbell's archetypal 'Hero with a Thousand Faces', who in the aftermath of world-shattering violence struggles to remake a world in which he can be transfigured, Graves's work charts his often terrifying confrontation with, and eventual integration of, these forces into a system which gives them meaning. Those powers by which he feels most threatened are redeployed and deified in the figure of the White Goddess, 'the ancient Mediterranean moon-goddess whom Homer invoked in the *Iliad* [...] and to whom most traditional poets ever since have paid at any rate lip-service.'⁶

The Goddess and Graves's experience of trauma are inextricably intertwined. Her Myth provided a poetic infrastructure for a world that, following the obliterating experience of total war, could no longer be understood within the traditional parameters of history or reason. She is the reification of all that he sees as his undoing and, paradoxically, his salvation; one begets the other, in a cyclical interchange of destruction and rebirth. The feminine became for Graves the primal force upon which civilisation was founded, and the Goddess a sustaining, omnipotent influence to which, as a true poet, his life must be dedicated. She is the female principle in its three archetypal aspects: mother who bears man, the bride to whom he is lover, and the layer-out who presides over his death and burial; the poet offers himself in sacrifice to her, repeatedly,

⁴ Randall Jarrell, 'Graves and the White Goddess', in *The Third Book of Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1965), pp. 75-112 (p. 82).

⁵ Frank L. Kersnowski, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. xii.

⁶ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, ed. by Grevel Lindop, 4th edn. (London: Faber & Faber, 1999) p. 490.

in order to be cleansed of his patriarchal sins (pride, possessiveness, even murder) and resurrected anew in the transcendence of her love. He must willingly suffer for his poetic inspiration, for what she offers is not bliss but a ‘focus and challenge’, happiness in the precise English sense of ‘hap: happening.’⁷ This sacrifice is reminiscent of those made by the soldiers of the Great War but, in this feminine, life-giving context so anathema to the patriarchal destruction of the Somme, it is a sacrifice that results in redemption and enlightenment rather than futility. Whereas the male principle values senseless ‘force at the expense of persuasion’, the Goddess’s demands on the poet give death a function; she embodies (for Graves) the correlation between ‘woman’s wisdom’ and ‘human truth’, to be adhered to at any cost.⁸ And, like his wartime experience, once fully realised the Goddess is in ascendancy throughout the majority of Graves’s writing. To comprehend how *The Anger of Achilles* is shaped by his trauma, it must be read through the lens of his ‘grammar of poetic myth’. Firstly, however, we must chart Graves’s progress towards his subjugated position as muse-poet, and explicate exactly what it entails.

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Graves’s wartime experience played a fundamental role in transforming him from Georgian pastoralist to Goddess-worshipper. In July 1916, having advanced to the Somme Front Line, he writes to Sassoon with uncanny prescience that he ‘want[s] to go home to a quiet hospital ward with green screens and no cracks in the ceiling to make me think of trenches.’⁹ Seven days after sending this letter Graves underwent one of the defining traumatic experiences of his life, one which not only left him hospitalized with severe injuries but radically transformed his conception of his own humanity. Although his personal mythology was rooted in and inflected by divers ordeals (including his unhappy schooldays at Charterhouse, his tumultuous relationship with Laura Riding and the death of his son David in WWII), it was the Great War that left the most significant mark upon his psyche, and of its freight this event proved to be the most profound. Ultimately, its structure and setting would become part of the tropic framework around which ‘the single poetic theme’ of the White Goddess is constructed.¹⁰

On 20 July 1916 during an attack on High Wood near Mametz, Graves was, as he wrote to his mentor Edward Marsh, ‘punctured’ by ‘the old Bosche [...] with a 5.9

⁷ Peter Buckman and William Fifield, ‘The Art of Poetry XI: Robert Graves’, in *Conversations with Robert Graves*, ed. by Frank Kersnowski (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1989), pp. 92-108 (p. 95).

⁸ Robert Graves, *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (London: Cassel, 1962), p. 63.

⁹ *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1914-1946*, ed. by Paul O’Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 55

¹⁰ *The White Goddess*, p. 408.

Howitzer shell clean through chest and back'.¹¹ Seriously injured in the eye, leg, and chest by shell shrapnel, he was carried unconscious to a dressing station where field doctors informed his Colonel, 'Tibbs' Crawshay, that his wounds were plainly fatal. Drawing up the official casualty list, Crawshay therefore assumed Graves's death and reported him 'died of wounds'. His parents received the Colonel's letter of condolence five days later. Several hours after this letter was sent, however, subalterns 'clearing away the dead found [Graves] still breathing and put [him] on an ambulance for Heilly, the nearest field hospital'.¹² The matter of his 'death', it turned out, proved difficult to clear up; Graves even read his own obituary in *The Times*, and his parents were unconvinced of his survival until they received an official wire on 31st July confirming he would shortly be transferred, alive, to England.

As farcical as this tale may seem (although not, of course, for his parents), Graves's 'death' became one of the most symbolic experiences of his life. He writes to Sassoon in August of that year that

[t]he rumour of my death was started by the regimental doctor and the Field Ambulance one swearing I couldn't possibly live—but it takes a lot to kill Youth and Ugliness however easily Youth and Beauty fade and die. [...] By the way, I died on my 21st birthday. I can never grow up now.¹³

As he suggests, after this watershed moment it is not the Robert Graves that was, but the Robert Graves who perpetually *is*—an individual out of time—that leaves the hospital in Heilly, an uncanny double of his old self, neither dead nor alive. In 1922, when quarrelling with Sassoon, he admonishes him:

It boils down to this [...] You identify me in your mind with a certain Robert Graves now dead, whose bones and detritus may be found in *Over the Brazier, Fairies and Fusiliers*, and the land of memory. Don't. I am using his name, rank and initials and his old clothes but I am no more than his son and heir.¹⁴

As D. N. G. Carter points out, following his twenty-first birthday Graves thus considers himself part of 'the select company of *deuteropotmoi*, or "second-fated", and in his

¹¹ *In Broken Images*, p. 56

¹² Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That and Other Great War Writings*, ed. by Steven Trout (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p. 165.

¹³ *In Broken Images*, p. 57.

¹⁴ *In Broken Images*, p. 134.

imagination has transmuted a bizarre occurrence of war into a distinguishing metaphor'.¹⁵ In the Classical period *deuteropotmoi* were individuals who had been pronounced dead, yet returned to their community; Graves writes of them in his 1957 poem 'The Second-Fated', 'a library of shades' assembled in that 'Hyperborean Queendom [...] | Where pure souls matrilineally forgather', no longer '[r]uled by the death which [they] had flouted'.¹⁶ By aligning himself with these figures he declares himself purified, a 'completed character' ('TSF', l. 24). He is rendered exempt from the fundamental rules and conditions (patriarchy, history, death) of a world which no longer makes sense to him, characterized as it is by ludicrous violence and what Graves views as a defunct civilization. In Ancient Greek society the liminality of *deuteropotmoi* afforded them exceptional abilities: knowledge pertaining to the ultimate reality could only be attained by the soul that has, as Plato has Socrates argue in the *Phaedo*, been liberated from the 'dead' body.¹⁷ When the soul 'returns' during a ceremony that declares the *deuteropotmos* officially alive, it does so endowed with supreme knowledge and other vatic gifts. This ritualized declaration amounts to a spiritual 'rebirth,' a rebirth Graves underwent on his twenty-first birthday and that we find articulated, twenty years later, in his poetic thesis of the White Goddess.

Graves documents the events surrounding his 'death' in *Goodbye To All That*, giving the specifics of his wounds, his treatment, and the physiological consequences that accompanied it, including anxiety and disorientation. It is in the poem 'Escape' (1916), however, that Graves reveals the psychological effects of his experience:

I felt the vapours of forgetfulness
 Float in my nostrils. Oh, may Heaven bless
 Dear Lady Proserpine, who saw me wake,
 And, stooping over me, for Henna's sake
 Cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back
 Breathless, with leaping heart along the track.
 After me roared and clattered angry hosts
 Of demons, heroes, and policeman-ghosts.¹⁸

¹⁵ D.N.G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (London: MacMillan, 1989), p. 20.

¹⁶ Robert Graves, 'The Second-Fated', *Encounter*, November 1957 (p. 13), ll. 24-31. Hereafter 'TSF'.

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. R. S. Bluck (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 219 (66DE).

¹⁸ Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, vol. 1 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 31, ll. 9-16.

Here we are exposed to the sounds that Graves would come to associate, on a fundamental level, with his traumatic experience. The roaring and clattering of the narrator's pursuers is readily recognizable as the cacophony produced by trench warfare. After years fraught with extended periods on the front line, the noise of battle has assumed a palpable, sinister identity of its own; in a 1971 interview, Graves describes being at home on leave as 'awful because you were with people who didn't understand what this was all about.' 'Didn't you want to tell them?' he is asked. Graves replies 'You couldn't: you can't communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment—ever.'¹⁹ Graves describes its idiosyncrasies to Marsh several months before his 'death', in a letter written from the Somme:

It's rather trying, having to go back into trenches after a three months' holiday [...] I have to get used to all the old noises, from the crack! rockety-ockety-ockety-ockety-ockety of a rifle bullet, to the boom! ... swish ...swish ...Grr ... GRR! ... GRR! ... *ROAR!* of a fifteen-inch shell and there are a lot of new terrors since last December.²⁰

Of all these 'terrors', however, it is the buzzing heard in 'Escape's narrator's head which is particularly significant. The result of repeated minor head traumas—in a letter as early as May 1915, Graves writes of a shell exploding so closely that his 'ears sang as though there were gnats in them'—this 'buzzing' was as real for Graves as the dissonance of rifle-shots and shells.²¹ And yet this sound describes Graves's inner world as much as it does the outer: the buzzing, as manifested in 'The Gnat' (1921), *is* shell shock. In 'Escape' we are also introduced, however, to the recuperative aspect of the Goddess in the figure of Proserpine, who clears the narrator's 'poor buzzing head' and returns him, healed, to the world above. As we shall see, traumatic noise permeates both *The White Goddess* and *The Anger of Achilles*, emerging as the dominant trope within Graves's aesthetic to describe his neurasthenia, connecting the two texts.

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The White Goddess is a daunting, difficult text. Eliot referred to it as 'prodigious, monstrous, stupefying, indescribable', terms, one cannot help but notice, which are

¹⁹ Quoted in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 170.

²⁰ *In Broken Images*, p. 42.

²¹ *In Broken Images*, p. 47.

couched in the rhetoric of war.²² It is also, at least in the context of this paper, a sort of key: both in the sense that it unlocks a door to a higher understanding of the classical adaptation which follows it; and that it functions as an index of signposts which allow us to navigate and decipher its cartography. This is due to the fact that, although a work of supreme erudition, it is nonetheless explicable only in terms of Graves's subjective experience.

The Myth embodies the conditions of post-war life as Graves understands them and, as such, the theoretical picture that Graves draws in *The White Goddess* is coloured in the palette of his own traumas. Daniel Hoffman suggests that, like Yeats, Graves needed 'to root imagination in an *a priori* structure of experience, a frame of archetypes or myth.'²³ His reification of the Goddess Myth is an attempt to cohere his trauma-induced conception of reality, and by extension the poetry that gives it unity and value, into an entrenched and credible foundation of meaning. The Myth's significance, for Graves, is in its potential to release him from the dark clutches of his traumatic symptoms, and allow him to be reborn into an Orphic, transcendent state beyond the vagaries of referential history in which he can narrate and therefore control them. Graves articulates this redemptive process in the poem 'Darien', in which the poet longs for the sacrifice of his old self at the hands of the Goddess in order that he might be reincarnated as his own successor, the vigorous and powerful titular character:

I knew then by the trembling of her hands
For whom that flawless blade would sweep:
My own oracular head, swung by its hair.

"Mistress," I cried, "the times are evil
And you have charged me with their remedy.
O, where my head is now, let nothing be
But a clay counterfeit with nacre blink:

[...]

"Sweetheart," said I, "strike now, for Darien's sake!"

²² Quoted in Jarrell, 'White Goddess', p. 78.

²³ Devindra Kohli, 'The Necessary Trance and Graves's Love Ethic', in *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's The White Goddess*, ed. by Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), pp. 52-6 (p. 54).

Transformed, he can return to the world with the ability to harvest the poetic produce of his traumatic experience and confront his own occluded history, thus 'remedying' the 'evil times'—no longer neurasthenic (a condition characterised by that which resists interpretation), but oracular (a condition characterised by prescience).

The White Goddess, Fran Brearton contends, is therefore a 'war book' in which Graves attempts 'to contextualize irrational and senseless slaughter, to acknowledge the conflict between the poet and the world—the violence within and the violence without.'²⁴ Indeed, both Graves the survivor and Graves the soldier are present in *The White Goddess's* pages. It tells of the fragmented, *amphidexios* God of the Year, both 'himself and his other self at the same time,' fighting for the affections of the Goddess.²⁵ He figures as 'king and supplanter, victim and murderer [whose] right hand does not know what his left hand does'.²⁶ With this occlusion of referentiality and self-knowledge, the figure of the God of the Year is indicative of Graves's post-war neurasthenic state which, whilst its symptoms had retreated into his unconscious somewhat by the time *The White Goddess* was written, was still a part of his daily life. But the God of the Year also emerges in his duality as the archetypal Gravesian soldier: guilt-ridden patriot; murderous guardian; defiling, destructive lover. The intolerable conflicted state which characterises Graves's immediate post-war existence is thus transmuted from an 'indecent and painful' battle between 'Good and Evil', into an honourable paean to the poet's Muse, 'an age long and chivalrous war fought for the favours of the White Goddess.'²⁷

The Goddess's recuperative role is outlined for Graves in the most 'comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature', Apuleius's *Golden Ass* (c. 160 AD), which he would publish in translation three years after completing *The White Goddess*. Invoked under her 'true name' of Queen Isis by the hapless protagonist Lucius, the Goddess announces her presence thus:

Behold, Lucius, I am come; thy weeping and thy prayer hath moved me to succour thee. I am she that is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the initial progeny of worlds, chief of the powers divine, queen of all that are in Hell, the principal of them that dwell in Heaven [...] At my will the planets of the sky, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the lamentable silences of hell be disposed. [...]

²⁴ Fran Brearton, 'Visions, Goddesses and bog People', in *Graves and the Goddess*, pp. 152-65 (p. 155).

²⁵ *The White Goddess*, p. 437

²⁶ *The White Goddess*, p. 437.

²⁷ *The White Goddess*, p. 437.

Behold, I am present to favour and aid thee; leave of thy weeping and lamentation, put away all thy sorrow, for behold the healthful day which is ordained by my providence.²⁸

As a metaphor for the coming to terms with the experience of war—‘the lamentable silences of hell’, here, can be read as those lacunas of referential history that characterize the traumatised subject’s experience, which (while the trauma survivor has no control over them) are subject to Isis’s ‘will’—she is nonetheless paradoxically as deadly as trench warfare ‘the ancient power of fright and lust—the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death.’²⁹

Yet while Graves’s war poems tell of a threat of death which overwhelms the narrator, in the poems which inaugurate his Goddess worship he voluntarily invites it: it is he who determines the conditions of his own suffering. As Andrew Painter suggests,

[i]n this way the White Goddess becomes not just a single metaphor for war, but an inverted one: deathly actions are now controlled in a way those of the war were not; the authorship of death is now with the pen and not with the bomb, and the White Goddess who would be the solution to what Graves thought of as the great patriarchal disaster is subject to the pen and becomes a controlled reproduction of that disaster modelled in the poet’s hands.³⁰

Graves violently illustrates the paradigmatic demise of the Muse-poet, who, he writes, ‘must die for the Goddess as the Sacred King did when a divine victim’ in order to be ‘reborn’ into a world which has been wrested from the patriarchal control that engendered his traumatized state.³¹

The monomyth of the Goddess condenses all that is finally important to Graves: even when she destroys him, she is an intrinsically recuperative force. The poet can transcend the vicissitudes of history and thus his own traumatized state *through* suffering; his debilitating, shell-shocked post-war condition becomes, in the discourse of her Myth, a worthy sacrifice that is rewarded with supreme knowledge and rebirth. Pain, evil, *trauma* are as necessary to the proper function of existence as the powers of good, and it is in acknowledgement and acceptance of this that the poet reaches a true understanding of his own reality.

²⁸ *The White Goddess*, pp. 67-8

²⁹ *The White Goddess*, p. 20

³⁰ Andrew Painter, ‘How and Why Graves Proceeded in Poetry’, in *Graves and the Goddess*, pp. 144-51 (pp. 145-6).

³¹ Quoted in ‘The Art of Poetry XI: Robert Graves’, p. 93.

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What evidence, then, can we find of Graves's traumatic experience of war, and the recuperative power of the Goddess, in his translation of the *Iliad*? In translating this archetypal war-poem from ancient Greek to English, Graves is obliquely yet ineludibly confronting his own traumatic war experience, something he has avoided for twenty years after suppressing almost all of his war poetry and, in 1929, saying *Goodbye to All That* with his war memoir. Thus, although doubly mediated by the ritual of translation and the fictive stance of the original text, *Anger* offers him an opportunity to address the war experience that still traumatizes him under the guidance of the Goddess to whom he has now dedicated his life. The Goddess does not appear in *The Anger of Achilles* but (as with the majority of his later work) she is nonetheless a potent presence. In what Sibylle Ihm refers to as Graves's mythographical 'universe of self-referencing', she is the answer to many of the hermeneutic and ontological questions which the *Iliad* raises.³²

For clarity, Prof. Richmond Lattimore's 1951 translation of the *Iliad*—widely considered one of the finest English translations available—will be utilised as a 'control' text against which to compare *The Anger of Achilles*. Aside from its obvious merits, it already bears some relation to Graves's translation; we can be sure he read it prior to *Anger's* publication, because he damns it with faint praise as 'a competent crib' in his own introduction.³³ Let us focus now on a passage taken from Book 18, in which the poet diligently describes the images engraved on Achilles's sublime Hephaestean shield. First Lattimore's translation:

But the other army, as soon as they heard the uproar arising
 from the cattle, as they sat in their councils, suddenly mounted
 behind their light-foot horses, and went after, and soon overtook them.
 These stood their ground and fought a battle by the banks of the river,
 and they were making casts at each other with their spears bronze-headed;
 and Hate was there with Confusion among them, and Death the destructive;
 she was holding a live man with a new wound, and another
 one unhurt, and dragged a dead man by the feet through the carnage.
 The clothing upon her shoulders showed strong red with the men's blood.
 All closed together like living men and fought with each other

³² Sibylle Ihm, 'Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* and Matriarchy', in A. G. G. Gibson (ed.), *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 165-80 (p. 169).

³³ Robert Graves, 'Introduction', in *The Anger of Achilles: The Iliad* (London: Penguin Books, 1959), pp. 13-35 (p. 33).

and dragged away from each other the corpses of those who had fallen.³⁴

And now Graves's:

Meanwhile, the allied leaders, still busily discussing capitulation, heard a distant hubbub, and hurried to the ford. Some of their chariots had already sprung the ambush and become engaged. On the battlefield, Hephaestus engraved the figures of Strife, Tumult, and Death. Strife, recognizable by her blood-stained tunic, grasped a freshly-wounded man; Tumult, an unwounded one; Death held a corpse by its ankles. The combatants were extraordinarily life-like: they cast spears, lunged, struck, hauled away the dead for despoilment.³⁵

Graves significantly alters this scene of military retaliation. His selective, deliberate misreading of this section effaces the patriarchal Olympian mythology which it alludes to, and—as we shall see—relocates the *Iliad's* narrative within the matriarchal discourse of *The White Goddess*. Graves also presents us with a battlefield that bears traces of the Somme, relating aspects of the scene to his own experience of modern combat; note his use of military anachronisms: Lattimore's 'other army' is replaced by 'allied leaders'; 'overtook them' by 'sprung the ambush'; and 'fought a battle' by 'became engaged.' Moreover, Graves's treatment of Iliadic sound signifies this passage as one which bears the marks of his own trauma, often represented, as discussed above, by the trope of overwhelming noise.

The oddly childish word 'hubbub' which replaces Lattimore's 'uproar' is a particularly Gravesian descriptor. Staunchly proud of his paternal Irish heritage (his Grandfather, Charles Graves, was the Bishop of Limerick), he would have been drawn, one feels, to the word's Irish connotations: the OED cites its etymological root as *abul*, the war-cry of the ancient Irish, which developed into the sixteenth-century *hooboube*, 'often referred to as an Irish outcry'.³⁶ In modernity, it refers to both the noise of a crowd and to the shouting of a war cry—apt, then, for the context in which Graves uses it in *Anger*. 'Hubbub' appears elsewhere in his short story 'The Myconian' (1976) as an 'indescribable' outburst generated in the throes of 'pain [and] misery', and provoked by the sight of death.³⁷ As ever, Gravesian representations of sound are inextricably linked

³⁴ *The Iliad*, trans. by R. Lattimore (London: The U of Chicago P, 1951), 18.530-40.

³⁵ *Anger*, p. 306.

³⁶ "hubbub, *n.*" *OED Online*. 1899. Oxford University Press. 25 April 2014.

<<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>

³⁷ Robert Graves, 'The Myconian', *Complete Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 292.

with traumatic experience. The word also recurs in 'Blackening Sky', an entry in his Colophon to *Love Respelt* (1967):

Lightening enclosed by a vast ring of mirrors
 Instant thunder extravagantly bandied
 Between red cliffs no hawk may rest upon,

[...]

Against this insensate hubbub of subsidence
 Our voices, always true to a fireside tone³⁸

Not only do these stanzas draw on Shelley's assertion that '[p]oets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present', here 'hubbub' encapsulates the incipient, perpetually reflected, and thus eternal chaos of the patriarchal mechanarchy which threatens the poet and his Muse, cast in stark relief against the muted, 'fireside tone' of their own 'voices' which softly '[m]editate on the secret marriage of flowers | or the bee's paradise' (594).³⁹ The noise which 'hubbub' embodies, both here and in Graves's translation of the *Iliad*, is formless, destitute of sense or feeling, and therefore anathema to the poet. In *Anger*, it specifically projects connotations of the mechanized horror of the Somme, as well as the apocalyptic cacophony that attended it, onto the *Shield's* mimesis of the Skamandrian plain.

Whereas Lattimore's army is roused by the 'uproar arising | from the cattle', Graves's 'allied leaders' are responding to the 'distant hubbub' made by the 'chariots [that] had already sprung the ambush and become engaged.' It is the traumatic dissonance of battle which dominates this scene as Graves envisions it, not the lowing of livestock, and when the allied leaders hurry to the ford to find the source of the noise they are met by the embodiments of those aspects of warfare that Graves associates with the noise of battle, and therefore his own neurasthenic condition: 'Strife, Tumult, and Death'. It is at this juncture, however, that Graves rewrites patriarchal Homeric Olympian dynamics by introducing the figure of the White Goddess herself.

In terms of the *Shield's* ekphrasis, one would find difficulty arguing against the proposition that this scene be categorized as Homeric narrative: at this juncture in

³⁸ *Complete Poems*, p. 594.

³⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*, ed. by Bruce Woodcock (Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), pp. 635-60 (p. 660).

Lattimore's translation, we are 'viewing' a battlefield, not 'reading' a shield; there is no break in the forward motion of action. Graves, however, 'zooms out' before the three aspects of warfare can truly materialize: 'On the battlefield, *Hephaestus engraved the figures of Strife, Tumult, and Death* [emphasis mine].' In a 1955 letter to the mycologist R. Gordon Wasson Graves writes that 'Hephaestus, originally a Helladic hero—he was matrilineal, without a father—is said to have been educated by the Goddess Thetis'.⁴⁰ By reintroducing Hephaestus into the scene, Graves not only reminds us that he is resituating the *Iliad's* narrative within a matriarchal framework—the god was created by a self-sufficient femininity, and the shield, the very events we are reading, is implicated in that matrilineal line—he also implicitly draws Thetis into the narrative, a deity who, Graves writes in *The White Goddess*, was an incarnation of the Triple Goddess succeeded by Olympian Zeus c. 1243 BC.⁴¹ Graves thus implies that the scene we are reading is being created by a craftsman sprung from purely feminine origins, and whom the White Goddess herself, in one of her many aspects, has instructed in his art.

The Greek word *eris* is traditionally translated, as Lattimore has done, as 'Hate' rather than 'Strife'. Both words equate to discord and antagonism, but 'hate' implies a more personal aversion, whereas 'Strife' signifies the impersonal hostilities of enemy factions that characterised the Great War. *Kudoimo* refers to the uproar, confusion, or din of battle, and here Graves substitutes Lattimore's more generic 'Confusion' with 'Tumult'. Like 'hubbub', this dwells on the noise produced by the antagonists—a noise that Graves seems unable to escape. Finally, we are introduced to *ker*—'Death.' At this stage, Graves's deliberate misreading comes to the fore. It would be salient, therefore, to provide a brief mythological background for this figure.

Ker is not, in fact, death itself; this is *thanatos*, whom *ker* attends. A complex, protean figure, *ker* is a female death-spirit of mutable form. Like Hate she is more personal than death, and therefore significantly more dangerous: '[e]ach man', writes James Redfield, 'has his own *ker*, who watches him hungrily. The *ker* has an interest in his death and leads him to it.'⁴² A 'ravisher and swallower', *ker* is thus bound inextricably to two aspects of Graves's Triple Goddess ('lover and layer-out'), as this wonderful passage, taken from Emily Vermeule's *Aspects of Death*, elucidates:⁴³

⁴⁰ Robert Graves to R. Gordon Wasson, n.d. [c. Oct 1955]. Tina and R. Gordon Wasson Archive: Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., USA.

⁴¹ *The White Goddess*, p. 222.

⁴² James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (1975; Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994), p. 184.

⁴³ Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979), p. 253.

[T]he *ker* of black *thanatos* can knock a man down and master him; no one can duck or avoid her, she is ten thousand. She is more active and vivid than the usual personifications of battle-field panic and noise, for she is sometimes dressed and her clothes are sprinkled with blood; she has hands and drags corpses by the heels; she has jaws and will later have claws. She is the poetic and private equivalent of the corpse-ravagers of war, the birds and dogs, or the sphinxes, Sirens and Harpies; she has been understood as a ghost, a bacillus, lust, disease, lack of morals; a sister of sleep, death, and the furies [...]. In art she is winged, and may be designed both as attractive and repulsive, as death is both. ⁴⁴

Considering *ker's* points of contact with Graves's Goddess, that 'ancient power of fright and lust', his treatment of this figure in his own translation is particularly telling. Although *ker* recurs forty-seven times throughout the *Iliad*, Homer only personifies her fully on Achilles' shield, where she holds 'a live man with a new wound, [...] another one unhurt, and drag[s] a dead man by the feet'. Across all of the other translations I have consulted, she is thus figured as Death, heralding, facilitating, and revelling in the demise of the combatants. In *Anger*, however, some of her part is given to other players, and Homer's Olympian dynamics are subverted: it is 'Strife' who wears *ker's* blood-stained tunic, and 'grasp[s] a freshly wounded man', while 'Tumult' attends the 'unwounded' one; *ker* is associated only with the dead, not the dying—only with those whom the Goddess favours, who, like the second-fated, have passed beyond mortal time. She 'h[olds] a corpse by the ankles' instead of 'dragg[ing] [him] by the feet through the carnage', enacting both a lover's embrace and the bearing aloft of a sacrificial offering. Within the context of the *Iliad*, *ker's* dragging of the dead warrior foreshadows Achilles' desecration of Hector's body. What work, then, is Graves's reconceptualization of this scene doing, and how does it contribute to situating *Anger* in the corpus of his writing that strives towards post-traumatic catharsis? To address this question, it is fruitful to regard Graves's passage as the product of densely layered lenses: here, his war experience and personal Myth collude to furnish Homer's *Iliad* with a representation of the Goddess, in her third aspect of *death-goddess*, reigning over trenches which signify both the Trojan War and the Battle of the Somme.

The *keres*, as Redfield points out, have teeth, wings and talons: they are thus a composite of the conventional Homeric scavenger animals (dogs and birds) that eat the unburied dead, and are therefore 'emblematic of the antifuneral'.⁴⁵ *Keres*, however, do

⁴⁴ *Aspects of Death*, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁵ *Nature*, p. 184.

not feast on unburied corpses; they eat men who are dying. 'The presence of the *keres* on the battlefield', Redfield continues, therefore

suggests that the antifuneral is latent in all combat—that the defilement of the dead by scavengers is an extension of combat and a development of its inner logic. [...] At the moment of death the organism is converted from subject to object; flesh becomes meat. The *keres* devouring the dying are an image of organic death.⁴⁶

Unlike Lattimore's 'Death', Graves's *ker*, or 'Death-Goddess', does not participate in this objectifying process. It is Strife who grips a freshly-wounded man, reduced by the inherent, obliterating enmity of war to nothing more than an assemblage of functioning and non-functioning parts; as in the dehumanizing, regurgitated casualty lists of the Great War, the individual soldier becomes nothing more than a statistic, categorized as able-bodied, wounded, or dead. 'Tumult', the trauma of unbearable noise, 'grasps', clutches, and greedily seizes the senses of the (visibly) unwounded man, as psychically debilitating as the physical 'Strife' manifested outwardly in the wound of his comrade. 'Death', however, stands aloof; her charge is no longer a dying or traumatized man, but a 'corpse'. Without its Gravesian context, this term could confuse my reasoning; a corpse, by definition, literalizes the breakdown between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity. As Julia Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror*, '[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.'⁴⁷ Graves held a similar view, but the valorising principles of God and science, emblematic as they are of the patriarchy he detests, are displaced by suffering and sacrifice. On the battlefield, the corpses of his fellow soldiers were testaments to their sacrifice, and they often function in his work as signifiers of consolation. In 'The Dead Fox Hunter', he commemorates an incident at Loos where he found the corpse of a fellow officer in no man's land who, 'hit in seventeen places [...] had forced his knuckles into his mouth to stop himself crying out and attracting any more men to their death' by attempting to save him:⁴⁸

We touched his hand – stone cold – and he was dead,
And they, all dead behind,
Had never reached their goal, but they died well

⁴⁶ *Nature*, pp. 184-5.

⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p. 4.

⁴⁸ *GTAT*, p. 142.

... For those who live uprightly and die true
 Heaven has no bars or locks⁴⁹

In *Goodbye to All That*, Graves describes the corpses abandoned on no man's land that, 'after the first day or two, [...] swelled and stank.'⁵⁰ By lifting the dead body above the Iliadic battlefield, Graves's 'Death' saves the warrior from this organic, antifuneral fate. The fallen soldier remains part of culture, not nature.

That the dead man is held in a moment of stillness in a climate of nightmare, by the Olympian figure in the scene who is most significantly related to the White Goddess, both corresponds with Graves's Myth and disassociates it from Kristeva's notion of a corpse 'seen without God'. This figure of mortal death, suspended and subverted, stands for the poet as *deuteropotmos*, second-fated, released in death—as Graves was at twenty-one—from the wheel of life by the grace of the Goddess he serves, and who is literally *seen with him*.⁵¹ We are presented with an image of the White Goddess removing the soldier from the battlefield, extricating him from his traumatic surroundings. He has suffered, sacrificed his old self, and has been rewarded with her redemptive love. He will not rot, he will not be eaten; the possibility remains that he may be reborn, purified and healed.

What we find in these lines of Graves's translation, then, is a moment in which the poet rewrites the *Iliad* in order to dramatize, in the terminology of physical transcendence, his own metaphysical recovery from the effects of shell-shock—his ultimate struggle to be 'reborn', transfigured from traumatized subject into an individual who has, in his own words, 'ceased to feel the frantic strain of swimming against the stream of time.'⁵² Within the new, matriarchal framework that Graves imposes on the *Iliad*, signified by both the Goddess's presence and matrilineal Hephaestus's introduction into the text, this passage moves away from the traditional concept of a translation towards a site of self-awareness and healing. And yet, in terms of catharsis, it is worth bearing in mind that *Anger* cannot be easily bracketed within the genre of trauma narratives, either. This transcendent state, in which Graves finds himself removed from

⁴⁹ *Complete Poems*, p. 19, ll. 3-15.

⁵⁰ *GTAT*, p. 211.

⁵¹ Cf. Robert Graves, *The Golden Fleece* (1944; London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2001), p. 125: 'We are all caught on a wheel, from which there is no release but by the grace of the Mother. We are whirled up into life, the light of the day, and carried down again into death, the darkness of the night; but then another day dawns red and we reappear, we are reborn ... Death is no release from the wheel, Anacaeus, unless the Mother should intervene. I sigh for perfect rest, to be taken at last into her benign keeping.'

⁵² Robert Graves, *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry, 1922-1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. x.

the 'stream of time', was practically enacted by his retreat in 1929 to Deia, the Mallorcan village where—apart from the ten years marked by the Spanish Civil War—he would spend the rest of his life. There he lived in disregard of modernity, avoiding, as he wrote to Hugo Manning in 1950,

what poets suffer who do not live (as I do) on reefs guarded by their hallucinations; [...] But you see this is an enchanted island, prosaically enchanted against flying saucers and Anglo-Catholicism and the Partizan Review & it has been my home [since] I suddenly realized that the glory had departed from England; & upped sticks & offed.⁵³

What other poets 'suffered' from was 'loveless circumstance', a state of being engendered by the degenerative turmoil of a post-war society that attacked both the psyche and the poetic sensibility.⁵⁴ Graves would never re-enter the fray, either of battle (although he tried unsuccessfully to re-enlist in the RWF after the outbreak of WWII) or of 'history' as he conceived it, withdrawing from the terrors and confusion of the modern age and, as Carter puts it, his disengagement from society 'consolidated as no other Graves's sense of himself as being apart, fatedly different from his fellow men.'⁵⁵ For Graves, this withdrawal takes on ontological importance and religious significance because of his hierophany of the White Goddess, and, to some extent, *Anger* is doing similar work. By shaping the *Iliad* to the contours of the Goddess myth Graves enlists a canonical text—in the fullest sense of the word—as ballast to the idiosyncrasies of his personal poetic ideology, thus legitimizing his retreat from the 'real' world to his hallucination-guarded reef of poetic iconoclasm. If the Goddess is enshrined in as paradigmatic and cogent a text as the *Iliad*, he is asserting, then surely her powers, including her cathartic potential, can be less convincingly denied.

* * *

As indicated by this passage, Graves's 'curious literalism' results in a curiously un-poetic translation of Homer's *Iliad*. Despite this, the muscular mythopoetics of *The White Goddess* have made their mark on the text, as have the residual traumas of Graves's experience of the Great War. Significantly shaped by the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder which dogged him until long after its publication, *The Anger of Achilles* can be most

⁵³ Robert Graves to Hugo Manning; 29 March 1950. Hugo Manning Papers: The Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas, USA.

⁵⁴ Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 125.

⁵⁵ *Lasting*, p. 27.

convincingly read not as a 'free' translation of the *Iliad*, but as an articulation of Graves's struggle to confront his own occluded history under the paradoxically benevolent and lethal auspices of the White Goddess. In the guise of the death-goddess *ker*, she has extricated the figure of the soldier-poet from the traumatic chaos of the Iliadic battlefield, rendered by Graves as a counterpart to the Somme of his youth. More than this, however, she has enabled him to mythologize his experience of shell-shock as a process that, under her auspices and in reward for his suffering, he can transcend.

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