

**The Narrative Structures of Robert Graves' Historical
Fiction: a Progression Toward a Conception of the Hero in
History.**

by

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Abstract

The Narrative Structures of Robert Graves' Historical Fiction: a Progression Toward a Conception of the Hero in History.

Ian Firla

Most commentators on Robert Graves' writings agree upon the importance of his ideas on mythology to the development of his unique theories on poets and poetry. Few critics have undertaken to apply the same approach toward an understanding of his fiction. This thesis undertakes to fill that gap by investigating Robert Graves' historical fiction in order to test whether his theories on mythology and poetry can also be found to play a part in his conception of history and historical legends. To that end, Graves' historical novels have been analysed from various narratological perspectives in order to uncover the often complex relationship between the author, his narrators, and the reader.

Robert Graves' heroes as autobiographers, and narrators as biographers, are found to suffer psychological neuroses that are usually the result of an overly acute awareness of history. They seem to be aware of the process by which actions and events are ascribed mythic qualities which pollute the story of their real lives. Some of Graves' heroes fall victim to this process whilst others attempt to gain from it. Invariably, as the thesis demonstrates, they all fail because they lack an awareness of the single true story to which Graves himself subscribed: that of the White Goddess.

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But all of this and all of that and all that will follow is dedicated entirely to my parents. I don't have the words to express how deep my love and admiration is for the both of you.

Chapter One

Introduction

Robert Graves' literary career spanned the greater part of the twentieth century. Throughout that time, many of Graves' various works, both prose and poetry, won bestseller status in Europe and North America. Many of these "best selling" novels, volumes of poetry and criticism remain in print today. Popular book shops still carry his works in a range and volume commensurate with writers whose reputations in academia are far greater than Graves' (see appendix two). If the list of titles currently in print were not enough evidence for the strength of his readership, Manchester's Carcanet Press is reprinting the entirety of Graves' major works in a twenty-four volume series over the next several years.

However, despite his popularity amongst the reading public and his prolific publishing record, Graves' works have received relatively little scholarly attention. Foremost amongst Graves' critically neglected canon are his novels—an unusual oversight given that it is his historical novels for which he is best known amongst the general public. There have been a smattering of critical works on Robert Graves; however, the majority of these efforts have focused on his poetry and his writings about poetry. Most significantly, the sequence of book-length studies that have explored Graves' poetry and whose conclusions will be a part of the discussion below

include: Douglas Day's *Swifter Than Reason*, Michael Kirkham's *The Poetry of Robert Graves*, John B. Vickerie's *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, Patrick J. Keane's *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves*, D.N.G. Carter's *Robert Graves: The Lasting Achievement* and Patrick Quinn's *The Great War and the Missing Muse: the Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon*. Other works on his poetry, including pamphlets by Martin Seymour-Smith and J.M. Cohen, make some excellent observations on his poetry and, in many ways, together with Day and Kirkham's works, have established how Graves' poetry was discussed by the critics who followed.

There are also works by foreign scholars like Hoike Koike-Ferrick whose study, published in Japan, covers much the same territory as Graves' other critics and adds little that is new to the discussion. Such works seem to be generated in countries where English studies include Graves and a domestic product is desirable. Koike-Ferrick concludes the preface to her work by restating the hypothesis already established by most of the Gravesian scholars mentioned above:

Indeed, Graves's lifelong poetic endeavour triumphantly culminated in his unifying vision of the White Goddess, inspiring him to write some of the finest love lyrics of our time. In them the depth of his perception and the vitality of his emotion are happily matched by his gift of lyricism and his mastery of poetic craft. His intense, terse, and sometimes epigrammatic idiom is as much a part of what makes his whimsy. Through the single controlling symbol of the White Goddess, Love and Poetry become identified with each other, thus enabling his allegiance to the Muse to bear relevance to real life on earth. His is properly the poetry of frustration and fulfilment, mirroring in his

unique vision what is essential and finally significant in our own perceptions.

(2)

Works such as this serve to propagate a well-known and somewhat tired image of Graves, but one which is popular for all it has invested in purporting an idea of eccentric “Englishness”. This thesis will attempt to redress this overworked image through a study of some of his historical novels which will, hopefully, serve to offer a new perspective on, and thematic remit for, Graves’ works.

As for criticism on his fictional works, until 1997, the single book-length scholarly work that deals at any length with Graves’ novels is Katherine Snipes’ *Robert Graves*. Her observations on Graves’ novels will feature prominently in subsequent chapters. Snipes’ work serves as a sufficient introduction to his novels; however, her study is not sophisticated and is usually limited to providing plot-summaries while making some general comments that make important thematic and contextual connections between the novels. In effect, Snipes’ work eliminates much of the drudgery which this thesis might have had to engage otherwise since her work includes descriptions of a literary-biographical nature, and summarises such details as who acted as secretary to Graves at the time of writing a particular book, as well as with whom Graves was corresponding about the manuscripts. Such details are not entirely insignificant since a text’s publication history is indelibly a part of its story; however, these aspects of Graves’ novels are not central to this work. Where it is useful, Snipes’ survey will be called upon to enlighten issues germane to the argument of this thesis.

The publication of John Smeds’ doctoral thesis in September of 1997 by Åbo Akademi is a timely one. The fiftieth anniversary of the appearance of Robert

Graves' *The White Goddess* is due to be celebrated in 1998 and will, no doubt, give rise to a flurry of publications on the subject of the book and its influence on the poets and poetry of the latter half of the twentieth century. Fortunately, Smeds' success is more than timely, and his ideas both anticipate and inform some of the work in this doctorate. Of the works published on Graves, Smeds' is the nearest in subject and object to this one. As a result of which, I think it important to summarise some of Smeds' ideas here if only to set up further analysis, agreement and objection which will follow later.

Critical opinion generally holds that Graves was first and foremost a love poet whose poetry dedicated to real life muses was, to some extent, justified by his loosely academic survey of matriarchal society which he referred to as his "historical grammar of poetic myth". Likewise, Smeds' analysis of Graves' writings on the Goddess' reoccurrence in the myths, songs and poems of various civilisations posits that Graves was consistent in his belief that all "true" writing reflects the thesis that in myth, literature and poetry there is "one story and one story only": that of the birth-death-devouring cycle of the king/poet/bard and his queen/muse. However, surprisingly, few critics have tested Graves' pre-Goddess works for their consistency to Graves' one-story theory and fewer still have gone on to examine his fictional prose for more than superficial references to proto-Goddess writings. This is where Smeds' work becomes especially useful. His analysis of Graves's use of myth is a significant departure from the majority of the existing criticism which tends to rely on biographical evidence to explain the waxing and waning presence of the Goddess in his poetry. Instead, he demonstrates how Graves' thesis evolves from early works

such as *My Head! My Head!* through to his later, and more famous, works of historical fiction and scholarship.

Smeds' thesis is straight-forward: Graves was as much a puzzle maker as he was a puzzle solver. Accordingly, as Smeds argues, Graves would take a myth or a legend, historicise it, then posit an alternative reading of it coupled with a complicating feature which then he, as a detective, would solve for us: his hapless and helpless readers. This, he argues, is the formula for all of Graves' historical fiction and poetry. *The White Goddess* does not mark the invention of something new for Graves but is merely a sustained application of a tried and tested method for making history interesting.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of Smeds' work, though, is how he connects Graves' methodology to that of modernists such as Joyce, Pound and Eliot. In his essay, "Thoughts on Mythology", Gide anticipates the effect of myth on the modern mind. Gide claims that the mythologist offers the reader only

... shards of myth, bizarre bits in which we still admire here and there, as on the fragments of an Etruscan vase, a chance form, a gesture, a dancing foot, a hand stretched toward the unknown, an ardent pursuit of some fleeing game, a link detached from the perfect chorus of the Muses, whose unbroken garland encircled the vase we recreate in our imaginations. (228)

Substantially, according to Smeds, *The White Goddess*, as well as those of Graves' works which both anticipate and follow it, fits the principles of just such a practice. Shards of myth are reconstructed by Graves in his peculiar and particular imagination from which he then basis his holistic narrative of a fragmented world: just like the modernists.

It is upon this last point that Smeds and I are most in agreement. The subject will be picked up further below; however, it is interesting to note that other scholars are beginning to recognise the modernist underpinnings of some of Graves' writing. An article by Grevel Lindop which will appear in the December 1997 issue of *Gravesiana: the Journal of the Robert Graves Society*, argues, very successfully, for the modernist effect generated by the multi-layered narrative of Robert Graves' short story, "The Shout". Lindop's introduction reads as follows:

'The Shout' is generally agreed to be Robert Graves's most powerful short story. It could be argued, further, that it ranks among the finest English tales of the supernatural written during the twentieth century—perhaps, indeed, the only one that can stand comparison with Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw' as a *tour de force* in the subtle art of applying a modernist manipulation of narrative technique to traditional supernatural themes, creating a refined and intensified sense of spiritual unease.

Lindop sets out to prove a point: that Graves' writings are too often read without suitable critical attention being paid by their scholarly and non-scholarly readers. Graves is a master of narrative technique and fluent in multiple styles of writing. So fluent, in fact, that his writings sometimes appear simplistic and completely without the sort of narratological inventiveness and sophistication for which modernist writings are known.

Lindop demonstrates that Graves reveals himself to be a veritable master of narrative techniques. At times Graves will show himself within a text, in what can only be described as a deliberate authorial intrusion, only to hide again behind a narrator who is sometimes ironical, sometimes earnest, but always ambiguous.

Graves' textual playfulness is both frustrating when one falls victim to his ploys and thrilling when they are discovered. It is with the effect that such discoveries have on their reader that Lindop concludes his paper:

... Graves has created a labyrinthine story in a small compass, a tale of puzzling surface and frightening depth where hints of myth not only threaten the sanity of the living but raise questions about the nature of reality itself. We are all aware at certain moments of how myth invades what we lazily think of as 'real' life. ... Graves's achievement in 'The Shout' was to capture this vertiginous sense of mundane surface and mythical depth without falsifying the magical elusiveness of either.

Clearly, the most recent scholarship is beginning to recognise the debt Graves' writing owes to the period from which it emerged. Though he may have argued (and these opinions will be explored below) that he was not a modernist, that he expressed his opinion that modernist writing practices were weak and while it is true that he railed against his contemporary writerly community, there is no doubt that the period had an influence upon him.

Perhaps because of his negative opinions on modernist writing and writers who are central to the academic canon, Robert Graves, despite his popularity as a writer, has never enjoyed the same level of critical attention as many of his contemporaries. A decently sized library can be filled with the critical studies on the fiction of Joyce or Woolf alone. The relative scarcity of commentary on Graves' works can be both good and bad. Critical attention, as has been argued by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon* and Peter Widdowson in *Hardy in History* (though the two scholars reach very different conclusions on the matter), "creates" a writer and

the way in which we come to “read” him or her. The “creation” of a writer, according to Widdowson, culminates with the writer becoming a “product of ... processes with all their material and ideological determinants embedded [within him or her]” (Widdowson, 15). W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, Graham Greene, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, e.e. cummings, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, to name but a few of Graves’ contemporaries, have all been the subject of exhaustive research that has produced vast quantities of books, essays and conference papers on the full range of their lives and works.

With a wide variety of opinions on a writer, a researcher can pick and choose a style or strain of opinion with which to align him or her self and, from that, carve out a scholarly niche. The relatively small selection of writings on Graves can limit such possibilities and further serve to entrench opinions and mystify their subject by making it seem as though a singular reading of that author is the “correct” one. Auden, as an example against which to contrast Gravesian criticism, has as much criticism written about him as a founder, leader and prime mover of an entire generation as he has for being nothing more than the best-known of a group of marketable poets (one who is only as representative of a generation as any other writer of the period). In other words, Auden has been lauded and vilified in equal parts. Graves, on the other hand, was stuck with the label of “arch conservative” by his contemporary critics, and all subsequent work by Graves’ champions has either been determined to overturn that opinion or to ignore it all together, instead, discussing the biographical connections between Graves’ life and his works.

Indeed, all writers, to a greater or lesser degree, have been “made”, as Widdowson suggests, and their “ideological determinants [are] embedded” within

them by the processes involved in “reviewing [their works], literary criticism, publishing, education, the advertising and tourist industries, [and] adaptation into other media” (15). In other words, the processes described by Widdowson create the image, one could almost call it “the critical biography”, of the writer through which all subsequent readings are, either actively or tacitly, performed. The resultant “critical biography” is the material through which we come to know the writer; however, Widdowson’s notion of the “making of an author” does not correspond with the more conventional sense of the author as a “living”, “real” person who might be known by friends, or relatives, or by a public who may have read his or her autobiography and letters. Rather, Widdowson sees the author’s creation as a sequence of “cultural accretions” (4) that produce a figure who might be very different from a “real” and “identifiable” person. Widdowson believes that these accumulations become a part of the very fabric of both the author and his or her texts (4).

Significantly, for the purposes of this study, Widdowson’s warning is suggestive of the hypothesis given by George Poulet and his fellow members of the Geneva School for their method of literary criticism which is based upon the notion of a writer’s work being a composite—a topography—of the author him or her self. From a recognition of the composite form of the writer represented by his or her literary oeuvre, the critical movement rationalised a phenomenological approach to investigating an author’s work. The Geneva School’s method will be returned to below; however, for the moment, the reference to their methodology is significant in order to set-up one approach which this study will be using in drawing connections

between Graves' varied works where an existing fabric of the texture described by Widdowson does not exist.

As Widdowson suggests is important to the process of the construction of an author, Graves' works *have* been "adapted into other media". The popularity of non-print media in the twentieth century is a factor which, in many ways, complicates any attempt at an "unadulterated" impression of the author. The *Claudius* novels, for example, still enjoy a popularity in their film versions which has the effect of attracting a "readership" to Graves' work who might never crack the spine of his many other texts. As a result, Graves is apt to be known to the general public as the author of a novel which they "read" as a film. The intertextual allusions which draw upon Graves' many other works and inform a reading of his *Claudius* novels are not likely to be shared by his television audience. Graves' novella, *The Shout*, for another example, was also made into a film which may have given some viewers an image of Graves as far more of a modernist than his subsequent works would suggest. The film amplifies the experimentalism of the text through the suitability of the filmic medium for presenting non-linear narrative sequences. Indeed, those commentators who write about Graves' *The Shout* are generally predisposed to classifying Graves as a modernist (albeit a somewhat eccentric one). The majority of his novels are also available in audio-book form, and much of his poetry has been recorded and is frequently aired on the radio which again affects how Graves is received by large segments of his "readership" which, in turn, feeds back and further alters his image. In fact, most of Widdowson's criteria for "successful" cultural accretions that ultimately produce an image of an author are met by Graves; however, the most important, the scholarship, has not only not been exhaustive, it has been barely begun

and, to date, it has followed the reading of Graves originally given by Cohen, Kirkham, Seymour-Smith and Douglas Day.

Effectively, following on from Widdowson's model, with each author we have an original (possibly unidentifiable) tapestry which has had extra-textual threads woven on to it by numerous hands—hands which are led by their own notions of how the tapestry of that author should ultimately appear. In *The Western Canon*, Bloom particularises the notion of canonicity as a subjective undertaking and criticises those opposed to the “making” of canons and authors who discount canon formation as nothing more than ideological activity:

Those who oppose the Canon insist that there is always an ideology involved in canon formation; indeed, they go farther and speak of the ideology of canon formation, suggesting that to make a canon (or to perpetuate one) is an ideological act *in itself*. (22)

If we take Bloom's notion of the formation of canons loosely, and also consider the formation of critical opinions on an author as an act of “canonisation” in itself, then Bloom's concern with the ideological influences on critical judgements become rather interesting. With each new critic's approach to a particular author/tapestry, some threads might be identified as foreign and will be removed by that critic in a supremely ideological gesture. In other words, the image of the author, or that author's “critical biography”, will always be dynamic unless, as often seems the case with Graves, those threads are monochromatic, and one is barely distinguishable from the next. Otherwise, each critic, conscious or not of his or her own particular critical, sociological, or political agenda, will re-create the portrait of the author in his or her own critical likeness. In this way, the reception of an author will be dictated by the

critical mood with which that author and his or her writings are received by the critic and his or her relationship to contemporary ideological concerns and agendas.

The appearance of four biographies in 1995, Robert Graves' centenary year, guarantees that Graves' image has been complicated. However, by putting the biographies together with a critical awareness of the kind highlighted by Widdowson and Bloom, we can see how the image of "Robert Graves" can be manipulated and exploit those alterations which become immediately apparent to the attentive reader. Of the four biographies available, only three are relevant to this discussion. The last, William Graves', does not deal with Graves' writing but is an impressionistic account of William's early years growing up with his famous father. While the book is a very good read, the substance of the author's experiences with his father are not of much relevance to this study.

The sort of muddle that biographers can lead their readers into is clearly demonstrable through a simple example from the recent publications. Miranda Seymour's biography, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge*, makes a case, for example, for Graves having been a confirmed homosexual during the First World War (65-7). Martin Seymour-Smith firmly contradicts Miranda Seymour's speculation in his updated and reprinted biography, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*. Seymour-Smith quoting Paul Fussell from his seminal study of the period *The Great War and Modern Memory*, suggests that Graves' involvement in homosexuality was limited to an idealised and entirely imaginative homoeroticism whose desires were sublimated by a chaste form of love (73-4). Finally, Richard Perceval Graves tackles the same subject by describing Graves' relationship with a Charterhouse classmate in very muted terms, referring to it as "idealistic" and "romantic" and quoting Graves' own term for

it (from *Good-Bye to All That*) as “pseudo-homosexual” (*Assault*, 88). Clearly, all three biographers are exposing their intentions in choosing the threads with which to weave the tapestry of their “Robert Graves”. Whether any actually matches the real figure seems besides the point. Each biography engenders a new “authoritative” fiction-come-objective account of that writer.

Miranda Seymour, it seems, would like to add a bit of spice to what Richard Perceval Graves makes seem a rather ordinary upbringing, and which Martin Seymour-Smith represents in hardened masculine and almost jocular terms. The truth can never be established absolutely, and so each biographer is left to choose which pieces of evidence he or she wants to put the greatest emphasis. However, when seemingly undeniable evidence crops up that confirms one biographer’s speculations over another’s, then the scholarly mechanism grinds into action and secondary sources previously praised or rejected begin to be reappraised (rightly or wrongly is not the issue here). The recent appearance of *Letters to Ken*, a published collection of war-time letters from Graves to one of his fellow-officers, does, if the contents of the letters are to be trusted, assert in Graves’ own hand, that in the period of Graves’ life which the three biographers are debating, Graves was involved in a serious heterosexual relationship.

All speculation as to Graves’ sexual persuasion seems entirely besides the point in discussing his work, yet, the topic does, invariably, have an effect on his words. Such pseudo-academic exfoliation and exegesis ends up creating a dense fog of speculation around a writer which does not illuminate his work at all but will nonetheless lead to secondary scholarship and compel the critic to anticipate such

advances. As a result, poems and novels are often read with the critic alert to potential themes which might connect to extra-textual features from the author's life.

The concerns raised by Widdowson on the subject warrant (and have seen) many volumes of scholarly opinion. To include the breadth of the debate here is impossible, and many of the more subtle issues are largely unimportant to this study. However, having raised the subject, it is important to notice how some of the critical industries mentioned above have been at work on the image we have of Graves and his writings and these, in turn, should be included in any book-length thesis if only to anticipate potential detractors.

This thesis began by lamenting the scarcity of scholarship on Graves' works, but scholarly writings on Graves such as the works discussed by the critics who have come to form, as it were, a school of Gravesian scholarship, do exist, and these have played a significant part in the construction of the portrait of Graves we see before us today. Seymour-Smith, Cohen, Kirkham and Day's works were written during Graves' lifetime and, at least in the case of Day's study, were vetted by Graves before publication. In the acknowledgments to his work, Day writes "I wish to thank Mr. Graves also for reading the proofs of this work and for correcting my more grievous factual errors." Graves' influence on Day's work is significant as is demonstrated through the attitude, for example, that Day's work shows toward Laura Riding as a person rather than a poet. Day's opinions on Riding read rather too much like Graves' own. Since Day was one of the first critics on Graves and others have followed his lead, his criticisms of Riding's works and relationship with Graves still tend to dominate Gravesian criticism. In other words, the image we have of Graves today is still, for the most part, a self-projection. Whom Graves liked and who fell

into or out of his favour has shaped how generations of scholars have recorded their research on his work and its influences. In this sense, it is unfortunate that too much attention has been paid to his biographical side and while it makes for amusing conversation and charges idle speculation when one wonders about which of his real-life muses inspired one character or another in a novel or a poem, the resulting debate will not particularly help to illuminate Graves' otherwise neglected works.

To this end, the subsequent chapters will survey some of the critical writings on Graves as well as examining Graves' own writings on his own and others' poetry. The writings selected for the survey serve three purposes. First, they illustrate Graves' attitudes toward poetry and the writings and opinions of some of his contemporaries. Secondly, the theoretical basis of his critical writings will be juxtaposed with more recent critical practises in an effort to demonstrate why Graves' works are not presently in vogue. This second step will show how and why Graves' popularity has waxed and waned and how Graves reacted to critical opinion by adjusting how he represented his views on poets and poetry. Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of this study, the writings on poetry selected for discussion here demonstrate Graves' concept of the "true poet"—a notion which, as this thesis will argue, is the model for the hero whom Graves represented in his most famous works of historical fiction. A less guarded image of Graves and the subject of his writings emerges through the characterisation of the poet/hero which Graves argues for and represents in his scholarship and fiction. This image seems unaffected by Graves' alternatively affected and confrontational relationship with his critics.

The purpose of this study, then, is to focus some attention on Robert Graves' grossly neglected novels. Specifically, this work will examine the relationship

between Robert Graves' novels based on ancient Greek and Biblical legends as well as the histories of early Christian Rome together with his anthropological investigations on the sources and formation of myth. The attitudes of Graves toward the notion of the "true poet" will then be juxtaposed, chapter by chapter, with the attitudes Graves represents as those of his novel's legendary heroes and narrators. By this, I hope to demonstrate that Graves' attitudes toward verse are greater than the "mere" subject that they are directed toward—to demonstrate, in fact, that Graves' opinions on poetry are aligned with the opinions he ascribed to the historical personages we, as his readers, thought we knew from historical and literary accounts that predate Graves'. In fact, we will see that Graves' heroes are often Graves himself; at least, the self whom Graves chooses to reveal to his readers through his writings. This textual Graves is often at odds with the image derived and constructed by Graves himself or by the cultural forces described by Widdowson.

In the course of the next seven chapters this dissertation will trace the development of the hero in Graves' historical fiction from the appearance of mytho-historical heroic figures as the voice—the *implied* authors/speakers—of some of his early work, including his poetry, through to what will be argued is the logical—and, ultimately, failed—conclusion of Graves' project for his historical hero: the fictionalisation of an historical and secular Jesus. The failed hero though, as will be demonstrated, is actually a literary success on the part of Graves who applies his theory of the White Goddess equally to his reinterpretations of history and to his poetry which, in a sense, foreshadows his own successes and failures.

While the figures upon whom Graves chooses to concentrate his histories are as varied as Belisarius, Claudius, Jason (of the Argonauts), Hercules, Jesus, and T.E.

Lawrence, there are patterns which emerge from Graves' accounts of their lives which can be traced to match those of the portrayal of his own life in his autobiography, *Good-Bye to All That*. Such patterns, invariably, are a manifestation, to a greater or lesser degree, of Graves' belief in the absolute necessity of the male's devotion to the Muse Goddess. Those who fail the Goddess also fail in history. Where, traditionally, classicists see the trials of figures such as Jason and Hercules as cruelly fated, Graves interprets their trials as punishment meted out by the singular female deity rather than, for example, her Olympian counterparts.

The patterns of the failed and failing hero emerge from a close study of the narrative techniques that Graves used to construct the plots together with an analysis of the style of the narration of his heroes' lives intermixed with an intra- and inter-textual recognition of Graves' self-reflexive allusionary techniques. To that end, this work will employ an analysis of the success of Graves' narrative methods through the works of such critics as Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, Gérard Genette, Linda Hutcheon, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, David Lodge, Wayne Booth and, especially, that of the Geneva School's "Consciousness of Narrative Consciousness" methodology.

The latter of the influences is the most compelling since the school suggests a scholarly investigation of the "Consciousness of Narrative Consciousness" from a loosely phenomenological perspective. Such an approach tends to reveal that seemingly discrete textual moments are, in effect, indelibly bound within greater contexts that can be established from an understanding and investigation of Graves' methodology and application for his critical re-readings of myth and history as a basis for his fiction. Graves' rereadings have such a manifestly single-minded purpose that

to approach such idiosyncratic representations of well known myths, histories and legends with anything other than a crib-sheet full of Graves' speculations and conclusions means the reader may well find him or her self understanding something completely other than that which Graves has meant. Clearly, from a post-structuralist reader-oriented point-of-view, with an abandonment of Graves-as-writerly-authority, meaning may well lead to the discovery of a readerly *jouissance*.

Conversely, crib-sheet in hand, the reader may well also encounter the sort of "bliss" described by Barthes from recognising just how effectively Graves has manipulated the expected. Such manipulation of the known and knowable (i.e. that which can be referenced in an accepted concordance) serves to surprise the reader and to unsettle the reading experience and encourage a critical reaction from the reader. This, in fact, seems to be precisely the reading process that Graves has in mind when he writes:

English has always tended to be a language of 'conceits': that is, except for the purely syntactical parts of speech, which are generally colourless, the vocabulary is not fully dissociated from the imagery out of which it has developed—words are pictures rather than hieroglyphs. (*Reader*, 5)

According to this description of the functionality of the English language, a word is a part of a syntactical whole. Much like a Buddhist Koan¹, a word-sentence can be unravelled and its source and ultimate bases discovered, just as a picture (at least of

¹A type of logical puzzle that involves deconstructing a statement and then physically reassembling it in order to test the truth of the conjecture. If the physical construction matches a known hieroglyph then the statement is considered true.

the variety that Graves is invoking through his conceit) is necessarily *of* something even if it does not have an obvious representational element on its surface.

The former notion, that of a reader experiencing a text with “reckless” abandon, leaving aside the author and authorial commentary on a text and plunging into a readerly experience, can be left without further comment; any advice given here would frustrate the ignorance with which a reader should enter into the text, enjoyable though that process may be. The latter deserves some careful and focused attention though. To that end, approaching *Hercules, My Shipmate* with an awareness of Graves’ other works on the myth of Hercules has the effect of directing the reader through a sea of Graves’ obliquely related inter-textual sources. Such an approach needs some kind of theoretical grounding.

By employing a phenomenological methodology which involves the study of the consciousness of narrative consciousness, an understanding of the “mind” behind, and of, the works is revealed. The “mind” in question need not necessarily be, objectively, that of Graves in essentialist terms; rather, it is the mind which is projected by a topography of the works in their state of wholeness as an oeuvre. In other words, the purpose is to acknowledge, through a reading of Graves’ re-written legends, his active and conscious re-inscription of disparate myths into cohesive new myths. These new myths are made understandable and meaningful through tracing the network of those re-workings located in a variety of his works. What complicates any such interpretation of Graves is that his newly minted myths are often contrary to accepted readings, interpretations and understandings of the source materials. Consequently, it becomes more productive to read Graves’ versions of myths as texts unique to Graves and born of Graves. However, by coming to an understanding of

the intermingling of sources and Graves' self-referentiality, we can come to a method of raising his intertextual allusions from a marginal and secondary role to one which is primary for the development of his own form of narrative.

The Geneva School of literary critics, whose members included Georges Poulet and Jean Rousset, attempted to show, through their critical methodology, that the structure of an author's work (and by "work" they are referring to the sum of an author's creative output and not an individual text) reveals that author's mental universe. J.H. Miller, in his paper on the Geneva School of critics, argued that their agenda was to "replace a concern for the objective structure of individual works with a concern for the subjective structure of the mind revealed by the whole body of an author's writing" (307). That author's subjective point of view can then, in turn, be reapplied to the works from which it was gleaned.

The Geneva School's phenomenological approach may seem peculiar, even perverse for its complexity and the degree of the ideological demands that it makes. However, it is not so radically different from what is commonly practised in contemporary cultural studies. When a cultural critic examines, for example, the Disney canon, all manner of writings, broadcasts and films of the studio founder's career are used as tools through which to understand the social and political subtexts of the films. While the films are, ostensibly, produced for children's entertainment, an application of a consciousness of Disney's political consciousness is used as a means by which to ratify and contextualise (both positively and negatively) themes from films geared toward universal consumption in order to explain the ideological concepts that are being proffered to their consumers.

Simon During, in the introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader*, makes the observation that from its very outset (and he is referring to the 1950s' work of Thompson, Hoggart and Williams), cultural studies "concentrated on 'subjectivity', which means that it studied culture in relation to individual lives, breaking with social scientific positivism or 'objectivism'" (1). Such "individual" lives included, of course, the previously underprivileged and underrepresented consumers of "low" culture but, by the same token, also invested greater emphasis on those works which had previously been excluded from analysis because they were not of sufficiently "high" cultural status. Ioan Davies remarks that,

What the books [those of Thompson, Hoggart and Williams] paved the way for was a theorizing that was not *ad hoc*, piecemeal, fragmentary; a theory that was grounded in a consciousness of practice, and which was capable of making connections across quite discrete areas, but from the inside, as it were, from the situation of the individual as part of a collective on the road to cultural agency. (8)

"Cultural agency" can, indeed, be provided through a Marxist, neo-Gramscian, methodology traditionally posited by cultural theorists; however, the Geneva School method also has the ability to empower marginalised texts and their subjects by stimulating and organising the cultural accretions suffered by both texts and their writers; something which Marxist criticism which plays down the importance of the writer is not ideologically equipped to perform.

Quite simply, agency seems to be gained or proffered solely where attention is paid. By attention being given to a breadth (if a totality is not possible) of works, neglect is minimised and potentially overlooked textual and extra-textual themes and

causes are amplified. While the goals of the two movements are diametrically opposed (the Geneva School's goal is to endow agency upon the product of an author and the traditional Cultural Studies aim is to confer agency upon the consumer) the methods, crudely speaking, are not dissimilar. Both methodologies can, and do, reveal the good and the bad of an author, a trend, a programme, a genre or a medium.

Such attention to all detail as is explained above is not without its problems. Poulet, Rousset and the others eventually discarded their theories. The Geneva School's approach, like the attempt for a phenomenological recovery of the essence of everything undertaken by the increasingly frustrated Roquentin of Sartre's *Nausea*, is admirable; however, it is also untenable: there are, after all, only so many works that one may connect in a life-time of establishing connections. In the case of Graves and his account of Hercules and Jason's voyage on the Argonaut, any phenomenological investigation into intra and inter-textual meaning beyond the basic theme and plot can be limited to meaningful references to the role of the male hero. Additionally, such a tempered version of the Geneva School's approach provides an interesting vehicle for studying the works of Robert Graves whose plentiful writings in disparate genres on poetical and mythological subjects seem to beg to be drawn together and have their allusionary references duly explored.

Graves' belief in a single strain of mythology from a history of mythologies scattered by cultural, political and historical forces, outlined in works such as *The White Goddess*, has an undeniable presence in his historical novels. For example, in *Hercules, My Shipmate*, Graves' re-reading of Greek myths is, rather obviously, a prime subject of the work besides the associations which can be found in the novel

between Hercules and the Messiah of the Hebrew scriptures in *King Jesus* and *The Hebrew Myths*.

The connection between Hercules and the Hebrew Messiah will be duly explored in chapter seven. For the time being, it is important to note the similarity between various heroic figures in Graves' fiction if only to establish the patterns which this work will attempt to unravel. For example, Graves, as he presents himself in his autobiography, is not *dissimilar* to the Lawrence whom he represents in *Lawrence and the Arabs*, who, in turn, is strikingly similar to Belisarius. Significantly, elements of all these figures are represented by aspects of Claudius' personality.

Good-Bye to All That, as Graves' autobiography and, within his canon, seminal survey of the failed hero (himself), seems the logical starting point for any investigation of Graves' narrative methodology which he uses for representing the concept of the hero to his readers. Together with *The White Goddess*, *Good-Bye* will be a constant reference throughout this work. The importance of the narrative techniques as well as the substance of these works on Graves' other efforts cannot be underestimated. Technically, a great deal of Graves' methodology becomes understandable when one notices the emendations and corrections to his life story that he made while rewriting *Good-Bye* in 1957. While substantially, both *Good-Bye* and *The White Goddess* can be read as the literary—the public as opposed to the private—face of Robert Graves, the former demonstrates how Graves wanted his public image to appear while the latter is an expression of his method of thought. Together, the works reveal Graves' overall project for himself, the notion of the poet and the concept of the hero.

The style and tone of his autobiography, based very much on his biography of Lawrence, has a significant influence on his historical fiction². Indeed, the success of the Lawrence biography must have been, at least in part, a reason for maintaining the stylistic precedence for his own autobiography. In turn, the formula for biographical-history that had proved so successful became the bases for the later literary fiction including such commercial successes as *I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God*, *Count Belisarius*, *Hercules*, *My Shipmate!*, and *King Jesus*—all fictional autobiographies or biographies.

Graves' historical fiction proved to be not only a commercial success but also inspired a catalogue of mimics ranging between the work of Graves' contemporaries such as Rex Warner (*The Young Caesar*, *The Imperial Caesar*) to that of more recent writers such as David Wishart whose novel *I, Virgil* owes (though Wishart does not

² Graves biography is indebted to Lawrence's own autobiography based on the, at that time unpublished, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* but read by Graves in manuscript form and transcribed into a highly successful—both critically and financially—work, *Lawrence and the Arabs*:

The project almost immediately became much larger than Graves had expected. ... Cape and Doran agreed that Graves's book should be transformed into a longer popular study. It was hurriedly expanded to three times the length originally proposed; just over three-quarters would be a paraphrase from *Seven Pillars*. In this way, by the time *Revolt* had sold out, Cape would have a profitable substitute; Graves too would benefit from the new scheme. (Wilson, 380)

offer an acknowledgement of the influence) an immense debt to the style and technique of Graves' Claudius works. Wishart's novel begins, "I was born on 15 October in the first consulship of Pompey the Great and Marcus Licinius Crassus in a ditch near Mantua" (7). Further, like so many of Graves' characters, Wishart's Virgil is ignorant of his historical importance. In this sense, not only is Wishart's title a nod to the style and technique popularised by Graves but, quite clearly, the confessional and self-effacing style of the narrative is almost a carbon copy of Graves' own.

Self-effacement, a conscious self-depreciation by the speaker in relation to his or her subject, is at the core of Graves' presentation of his narrators and of his narrators' presentation of themselves. This rhetorical device is the primary tool with which multiple levels of structural irony are created through which Graves, and his speakers, communicate meaning to their *ideal* audiences. Graves, and his narrators, with a heavy reliance upon an unstated understanding between the text and the reader of the existence of an ironic superstructure, assume an air of naïveté. The narrator, invariably, as though he is hiding the "truth" of the text from some implied audience, seems to stumble upon information and successes and makes it seem as though he is never aware of how exactly he manages such accomplishments.

Graves, for example, expends a great deal of time and effort in his autobiography playing down his role in personal and military successes, describing himself, instead, as a casual observer who was fortunate enough to witness, either personally or through casual discussion, momentous events. Numerous scenes can serve as ready examples for this rhetorical practice; however, a particularly effective one comes from Graves' arrival at the trenches where legend, or rather, pathetic circumstances made legendary by the mythologising process of trench life on the

home front, are recorded by Graves in a tone which is supposed to represent earnestness and sincerity but which is, in fact, charged with sarcasm and irony. In fact, Graves retells a form of urban myth, a story that was likely repeated by hundreds of correspondents from the front. But Graves tells it as though he encountered it first-hand (which he may have done; however, the point here is to observe the rhetorical devices Graves uses in retelling the story which is quite obviously based on an inflation or exaggeration of the truth or experience):

‘ ... This is Price, who only joined us yesterday, but we all like him; he brought some damn good whisky with him. Well, how long is the war going to last and who’s winning? We don’t know a thing out here. And what’s all this talk about war-babies? Price pretends he knows nothing about them.’ I told them about the war and asked about the trenches. (97)³

The allusion to “war-babies” is subtle in this passage; however, several pages later, the irony is made complete and the need for the “damn good whisky” is understood to be needed for more than courage:

I shook the man by the arm and noticed suddenly that the back of his head was blown out. The first corpse that I saw in France was this suicide. He had taken off his boot and sock to pull the trigger of his rifle with his toe; the muzzle was in his mouth. ‘Why did he do it?’ I said. ‘He was in the last

³All future references to the 1929 edition of *Good-Bye to All That* will be made by page number only. References to the 1957 edition will be made with the year and page number in parentheses. The passage quoted above, for example, would be recorded as (1957, 85).

push, sir, and that sent him a bit queer, and on top of that he got bad news from Limerick about his girl and another chap.' He was not a Welsh-man, but belonged to the Munsters; their machine-guns were at the extreme left of our company. The suicide had already been reported and two Irish officers came up. 'We've had two or three of these lately,' one of them told me. Then he said to the other: 'While I remember Callaghan, don't forget to write to his next-of-kin. Usual sort of letter, cheer them up, tell them he died a soldier's death, anything you like. I'm not going to report it as suicide.' (100-1)

Obviously, the soldiers felt that "war-babies" were being born as a result of extra-marital affairs that wives were having while their husbands are in active service.

Worse yet, from the soldier's perspective, the men who were having affairs with their partners, are those who shirked their military duty in the first place.

Graves' account gives the impression that the trench-soldier was made to feel entirely isolated from his home and his family. Paradoxically, Graves makes one feel that an absolute absence from home was what many volunteers to the army at the early stage of the war were after or, ultimately, found themselves wanting. The war and the whisky helped to forget what was needed to be forgotten: unemployment, marital difficulties, class strife and so forth. In a further irony though, should the soldier survive the enemies' efforts to kill him, he remained vulnerable to the incalculable harm done to him by the callous attitude toward his efforts by the press and its readers on the home-front. At the early stages of the war, the soldier was often considered a cavalier, an adventurer, or it was assumed that a spot of fighting would improve an otherwise weak character. The war was not considered seriously; it was generally considered a propaganda exercise; it would be over before Christmas. The

reality and the horror of the trenches as well as the sheer scale of the slaughter took some time to filter through to the popular imagination.

This last theme is developed below in discussing Graves' efforts as a liberal social critic; however, for the moment, the rhetorical strategies employed by Graves in the passages quoted above are useful to notice. Graves remains vague about the details of the division, the soldier and the location of the suicide. Such vagueness seems to indicate that the anecdote is retold for its shock value (the soldier's suicide seems particularly desperate and dehumanisingly pathetic) and through the attention grabbed by the effect it is retold for its aphoristic value. The blame the reader is asked to shoulder is magnified by the ordinariness with which the suicide is handled by the Irish officers. On the other hand, the language 'recorded' by Graves is particular: "We've had two or three of these lately ...", "...while I remember...", "...usual...", "... record it as a soldier's death, anything you like..."—it is particular in its mundane and nonchalant tone; yet, surely, a young Graves fresh to the trenches can not have been so blasé to the sight of this, his "first corpse". Any shock which may have been initially recorded by Graves has been deliberately extirpated in order to focus his readers' attention to the very passivity and callous disregard for life in war. What should have been empathy for the Irish soldier's sad and pathetic fate, was completely ignored with the hardening of Graves' principles and sensibilities through a prolonged exposure to the savagery of the front. In this rather persuasive manner, Graves manages to coerce his reader into experiencing the war from his point of view. The reader, like the Graves who is writing the account of the event, begins to see the war through the jaded eyes of its protagonist.

One reason why Graves might want to maintain this effect throughout *Good-Bye to All That* is to give the impression that he has remained distant and dispassionate about the events he is describing. Additionally, the author's distance from his subject arises because he is recording a personal history as a form of salutation rather than as an apology—a salutation which was supposed to have been final and a record of disdain for English society. His rejection of the society for which he fought seems absolute and will be focused upon further in chapter two. However, in these introductory remarks to this study, the influence upon Graves of the biography of T.E. Lawrence, a most English hero, must also be mentioned.

Graves' biography of Lawrence was written two years before he undertook to write his own autobiography. For the most part, Graves' biography is based upon Lawrence's own account of his part in the Arab Revolt. Not only are most of the events retold in the same sequence that Lawrence records them but Graves seems to borrow from Lawrence's style a great deal as well. The similarities in style between Graves and Lawrence's works arise largely from a shared attitude in the narrative point-of-view. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, of course, rather predictably for the autobiographical genre, is written in the first person. Naturally, it would be odd for a biographer to do the same, and Graves maintains that convention by transcribing Lawrence's adventure into the third person. However, Lawrence's attitude toward his role in the Arab Revolt is maintained in the transition from autobiography to biography and is contrary to the image of Lawrence upheld in the popular media. Lawrence presents himself as being above the need for praise or self-promotion. He claims that he wrote his account solely because, "It seemed to me historically needful to reproduce the tale, as perhaps no one but myself in Feisal's army had thought of

writing down at the time what we felt, what we hoped, what we tried" (21). Graves assumes a similar air when describing some of his experiences of the First World War in *Good-Bye to All That*: "In 1916, when on leave in England after being wounded on the Somme, I began an account of my first few months in France. Unfortunately, I wrote it as a novel and I have now to retranslate it into history" (90).

Furthermore, Lawrence is usually represented by historians such as Basil Liddell-Hart as the primary instrument of the British in manufacturing the successes of the Arab revolt. Lawrence, however, in a manifestly self-deprecatory display, only makes claims for his direct involvement (as opposed to his immediate observations) when he felt he had to defend the Arabs against the exploitative designs of the British government and military. In situations such as these, he insists that he was a tool of the Arabs rather than the British. One such example occurs when Lawrence is confronted by the Arabs who had begun to doubt the sincerity of the British involvement in their cause:

Clear sights of my position came to me one night, when old Nuri Shaalan in his aisled tent brought out a file of documents and asked which British pledge was to be believed. In his mood, upon my answer, lay the success or failure of Feisal. My advice, uttered with some agony of mind, was to trust the latest in date of the contradictions. This disingenuous answer promoted me, in six months, to the chief confidence-man. In Hejaz the Sherifs were everything, and I had allayed my conscience by telling Feisal how hollow his basis was. In Syria England was mighty and the Sherif very low. So I became the principal.

In revenge I vowed to make the Arab Revolt the engine of its own success, as well as handmaid to our Egyptian campaign: and vowed to lead it so madly in the final victory that expediency should counsel to the Powers a fair settlement of the Arabs' moral claims. This presumed my surviving the war, to win the later battle of the Council Chamber—immodest presumptions, which still balance in fulfilment. (283)

Basil Liddell-Hart, writing his historical account of the events of the Arab revolt eighteen years after their occurrence, consolidates the betrayal that Lawrence had feared. In his description, the Arabs are only a convenient and exploitable tool for British concerns in the region: "The capture of this sea base [Aqaba] on the northern arm of the Red Sea removed all danger to the British communications in Sinai and opened the way for the Arabs to become a lever on the flank of the Turkish forces opposing the British" (212). Liddell-Hart makes no mention of the fact that the Arabs were fighting for their independence which surely, from their perspective, was as much a feature of the war as the otherwise Eurocentric opinion holds.

The trouble with Lawrence's account, and by extension also of Graves' account of Lawrence, is that Lawrence's modesty seems false. Lawrence's detractors point mockingly at Lawrence's attempt to "pass" as an Arab by donning their garb, snigger at his attempts to assume an Arabic style of travel and Arabic survival techniques for the desert. These, however, were the most earnest aspects of Lawrence's relationship with the Arabs as he describes them in his book. Where the strongest doubts lie as to the authenticity of his account, though, are about how sincere Lawrence's desire was to win independence for the Arabs. Throughout *Seven Pillars* Lawrence is too ready, albeit with an air of reluctance, to claim successes as a

result of his own “chance” and wisdom. Graves perpetuates this myth but does so less convincingly than Lawrence primarily because in the process of rewriting the text into the third person he is obliged to begin events by locating Lawrence’s name squarely at the centre of the narrative.

Graves’ description of the settlement of a blood-feud between two desert tribes, an event described in great detail in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, makes Lawrence seem the primary catalyst behind the solution for—if not the actual motivation for—the truce:

How to spread the Revolt up to Damascus over this chequer-board of communities each divided against its neighbour naturally by geography and history, and artificially by Turkish intrigue was a most baffling problem: which however Lawrence set himself to solve. (224)

What compounds the narratological issues surrounding this passage is, as mentioned above, the shift between the narrative emphasis from the first to the third person which simultaneously serves to fictionalise Lawrence’s presence at the scene and lends weight to the suggestion that it was Lawrence who was the prime motivator and diplomat behind the settlement.

Lawrence, on the other hand, in describing the end of the feud between the desert tribes can distance his presence from the event. Lawrence describes Feisal, in the third-person, as the unifying element in an otherwise unruly region of self-serving tribal leaders: “He [Feisal] showed himself worthy of this achievement. He never gave a partial decision, nor a decision so impracticably just that it must lead to disorder” (181). Through the use of the third-person, Lawrence suddenly makes himself seem a chronicler, a mere scribe recording the great Feisal’s achievements.

Lawrence, himself, is apparently nowhere to be seen: since he was not officially supposed to have been involved in the campaign. He is just, so we are led to believe, an observer of the peace-making and unifying Feisal. Yet, in the section preceding the settlement, Lawrence makes certain that his readers are aware of his presence: “We [Lawrence and Feisal] were proud to see them [representatives of warring tribes] coming thus far to greet us, yet not content for they were less fit than the abu Tayi for our proposed attack against Akaba” (180). Effectively, by personalising the narrative through the use of the first-person conjunctive (“we” being Lawrence and Feisal) Lawrence has paralleled himself with the leader whom he was supposed to have been supporting, by drawing himself up to an equal status and therefore, by implication, associating himself with Feisal’s actions.

The narrators of Graves’ later fiction, similarly (with the exception of Claudius), are not supposed to appear central to the events of the stories they are telling. Rather, they are supposed to be merely fortuitously positioned to offer an “objective” account of varied historical and mythical goings-on which the reader is supposed to find more interesting than the “meagre” events of the narrator’s experience. In actual fact, the narrators themselves often prove to be telling more about themselves than their supposed subjects.

In the *Claudius* novels, while Claudius, like Graves in his autobiography, is ostensibly the focus for events, he, like Graves, is more interested in describing the activities of those historical personages whom he encountered throughout his life. Furthermore, both Graves’ and Claudius’ voices make it seem that they are convinced by the truth of the “realities” which they are presenting to their readers; however, both narrators are, in fact, positioning themselves ironically in relation to the “truth”.

Claudius, for example, pretends to be mystified by his ascent to the Roman throne and even claims to attempt to dissuade the household guard from burdening him with the duty:

‘Put me down,’ I cried furiously. ‘Put me down! I don’t want to be Emperor.

I refuse to be Emperor. Long live the Republic! (*I, Claudius*, 395)

However, the rapidity with which he makes the arrangements for the Senate’s support of his emperorship casts doubt upon his sincerity when he claims that he will be able to use his power to restore the Republic to an Imperial Rome. Claudius’ apparent naïveté is remarkably similar to that of Lawrence and Graves. The parallels are uncanny and will be explored further in chapter four; however, in order to understand the thematic subtext of Graves’ novel, the reader is expected to detect this structural irony and to temporarily suspend his or her disbelief in order to receive the intent of the work’s fictional speaker.

To miss the ironic overtone of Claudius’ narration of the events of the novel would imply that Graves, through Claudius, was in support of dictatorships. So much could not be further from the truth. Graves’ writings on the subject of politics and society in *The Long Weekend* could not be more emphatic in its rejection of Fascism, Stalinism or any other form of state or feudally led oligarchic system. In order to understand Claudius’ motivation for writing his history it is important for the reader to recognise the relationship between Claudius as the implied author of the text whose fictional motives for producing his autobiography are sympathetic and synonymous with the real author’s.

The terms “real”, “implied” and “ideal” have been used to describe both the speakers/authors of Graves’ fictions and also his audiences. These terms are, of

course, Wayne C. Booth's from his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, and they will be used throughout this work in order to give a structure for discussing the intricate relationship between the many voices and personas which Graves constructs to narrate his historical novels.

Typically, Graves' historical novels are packed with details ranging between mundane particulars about fluctuations in the prices of commodities in ancient Rome to seemingly irrelevant details about an aspect of a ritual in pre-Roman Greece. Some of this detail seems completely extraneous to plot or theme or character development. In fact, such detail usually *is* extraneous to plot, theme and character; however, it is vitally important in revealing to the reader the psychological make-up of Graves' narrator and in revealing the purpose of the narrator's telling of the story. The features of his environment (social as well as physical) which the narrator chooses to describe are, ultimately, a reflection of his own character. The process of selecting which features of one's experience or memory to include in a narrative is as much a psychological as a narratological question; however, as is described above, there is a supposition of a relationship between the implied author and the ideal reader in Graves' novels that lends weight to an emphasis on narratological questions that are inclusive of psychological issues.

The narratological frame for the novels, usually implying a conscious and overt dialogue between author and reader, suggests that the meaning of the text actually lies somewhere beyond the literal meaning printed on the page. The narrators, who are nearly always ironic, can only be understood contextually. And that context requires the reader to connect Graves' non-fictional writings to his fictional works. Graves' prefaces and postscripts to his various works, which will be

examined in their respective chapters, insist upon the reader's awareness of historical contexts. In a sense, then, the opinions of Graves himself in relation to those of his narrators should not be an overly artificial practice unless irony itself is regarded as an artificial form of discourse. The features fixed upon by Graves' narrators are also, in many cases, the same as those Graves chose to focus on in both his autobiographical and scholarly writing. As a result, it is not surprising that they emerge, again and again, in his various works. For example, while there will be no attempt made here to argue for Graves being a Socialist writer, he is a writer with a social conscience. *The Long Weekend* and *Good-Bye to All That*, for example, are historical works which are constructed as reported, non-fictionalised fact and which serve to demonstrate and establish Graves' opinions on the social affairs of his time. Many of these same social realities are then explicated or suffered by Graves' narrators in their respective historical epochs. Their explications are made to seem more truthful given that each of Graves' narrators is in a position to observe the goings-on of his environment from a supposedly unbiased perspective (though their biases are very quickly made apparent). Each character, like Claudius, has unparalleled opportunities for "consulting the secret archives and finding out just what happened on this occasion or on that" (*I, Claudius*, 396). And in each case, that desire is to satisfy a historian's curiosity and to straighten out "... many twisted stories" (396).

With the exception of Claudius, the majority of Graves' narrators are unspectacular figures, historically speaking. Using a "common" point-of-view for narrating historically significant events places Graves' works squarely within the practice that defines the socialist realist text for Lukács. In *The Historical Novel*, Lukács describes the process for the historical novel that satisfies his requirements for

historical realism as one which is written from “below” history. Where, traditionally, epics and historical narratives were told by exceptional figures, Lukács found that the novels of Tolstoy and Scott, for example, dealt with minor historical personages “... in whom personal and social-historical fates closely conjoin” (*Historical Novel*, 285). He continues by explaining that

Through personal experience these characters come into contact with all the great problems of the age; become organically linked with and inevitably moulded by them; yet lose neither their personality, nor the immediacy of their experience. ...

This indirect contact between individual lives and historical events is the most decisive thing of all. For the people experience history directly. History is their own upsurge and decline, the chain of their joys and sorrows. If the historical novelist can succeed in creating characters and destinies in which the important social-human contents, problems, movements, etc., of an epoch appear directly, then he can present history “from below”, from the standpoint of popular life. (285)

Such a “standpoint”, according to Lukács, affords a work a greater significance than one which, for example, glorifies the famous individual (Napoleon and others serve as Lukács’ examples) who has “chanced” to be in a particular historical place at a particularly significant historical time. The randomness with which “greatness” is bestowed upon historical figures is the basis for Lukács’ distinction between “Belletrist biography” and a “scientific treatment of history and also a scientific biography” (*Historical Novel*, 314). In the former, the “insoluble task of reducing this [the dialectic of necessity and accident which finds the appropriate person to fill a

role in society] irreducible element of chance” (314) is exaggerated and produces a literary figure who is made to “stand on tiptoe” (314); while in the latter, the author “assumes the *fact* that this element of chance has already established itself in life [Lukács emphasis]” (314). Hence, the personage becomes merely a vehicle for conveying historical realities to an audience.

Historical Romances, where history seems to rotate about the affairs of an individual (and play almost a secondary role to the individual’s trials and tribulations), on the other hand, serve virtually no purpose for Lukács. Graves, seems to be working toward the same end as his peers. The “greatness” of history’s famous personages is reduced by Graves’ narrators who show them to be as blemished as the “ordinary” person. What remains great in Graves’ fiction are the outcomes of history since those are what shape the world of today. In the latter view, Graves differs from an absolute modernist practice and strays nearer to the Tolstoyan novel which Lukács favoured. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, for example, actually abandons the principle narrative in several sections, and Tolstoy (or his narrator) adopts unadulterated historical analysis to remind the reader of the significance of the history and the relative insignificance of the story’s characters. One such example sums up Lukács’ imperative:

In historic events the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have but the smallest connexion with the event itself.

Every act of theirs, which appears to them an act of their own will, is an historical sense involuntary, and is related to the whole course of history and predestined from eternity. (667)

Similarly, Graves' "great" figures are often described by their historically-lesser narrators as mere pawns of fate while the lives of the lesser figures, from the perspective of the text, are manifestly more dynamic: they love, they lose, they get ill, they *feel*. Of the Argonauts, for example, Hercules is doomed from the outset to live his fated life. Hercules' protégé though, Hylas, experiences a life that runs a much more unpredictable course. Hylas, ultimately, is more interesting to the reader. Hercules' fate is known from the start from the myths upon which it is based, and his character seems resigned to seeing that fate through to its finite ends. What goes on around him though, often proves to be fascinating and is Graves' forum for his mythographical assertions.

Nevertheless, while Graves' works do suit Lukács' model to some degree, Graves was writing from a very different tradition and hence, if Lukács' model was somehow primary and the sole measure for Graves' success or failure, he would fail. Perhaps one reason why Lukács' theories are generally more suitable to the study of continental literature than British is because, as Andrew Sanders points out in his *The Victorian Historical Novel*,

Lukács fails to appreciate ... the very distinctiveness of English history, and of the inherited tradition in fiction, ... The prejudices moulded by a bourgeois democracy in a nation which had not experienced invasion since the eleventh century and which had produced a typical compromise in its reaction to the Reformation, made in turn for 'provincial' fictional treatment of subjects derived from incidents in the French Revolution, or the Norman Conquest, or in the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (10)

Graves' writing is more bourgeois and conventional than that of the writers whom Lukács praises. For all the conservativeness of his upbringing, Graves is of another generation and perhaps, most substantially, it was his and his generation's participation in a brutal historical reality which allowed Graves and his contemporaries to take a fairly traditional Victorian form and charge it with all the relevance of a modernist movement. However, Graves' style remains apparently of another age since it lacks his peers' overt stylistic innovations but does, nonetheless, remain of a modern age through its historical revisionism.

Graves, like so many of his generation, felt himself to have been let down by the "great men" of politics and policy and so was naturally predisposed to being somewhat sceptical of the suggestion that "great men" might still exist. However, a traditional Victorian education that focused upon histories and analysis of history by the "great men" of the age, like Carlyle, taught Graves that,

The Commander over Men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men. He is practically the summary for us of *all* the various figures of Heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or of spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here, to *command* over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the day and hour what we are to *do*. [Carlyle's emphasis] (257)

Graves' education was firmly Victorian and despite his induction into the madness of war, through his lessons in the trenches, he seemed to write as though he wanted his reader to believe in Great Men—in heroes. That, as this study will show, each of

Graves' heroes ultimately fails in his tasks is a significant statement on how Graves came to view the place of the Great Men in history.

Perhaps it was because Graves lacked the company of those like Pound and Eliot in his poetic nursery, who with an American propensity for rejecting titular greatness were able to establish literary foundations based upon alternative value systems, that Graves originally found himself struggling with modernist poetry as something which attacked his sense of worth. As Daniel Hoffman points out in his essay, "Significant Wounds",

Although Graves's practices, like his theories, seem often conformable with symbolist assumptions, he has never knowingly been influenced by the French tradition which Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams brought into the mainstream of poetic modernism. It is principally the symbolist renunciation of syntax which Graves renounces. He has no interest in verbal copulars without connectives, in the *disjecta membra* of the imagination undisciplined by the inherent order of language. ... Graves combines a reverence for the truth of unreason with a reverence for the logic of language. (Bloom, 69-70)

The logic of language was perhaps the only shelter remaining for Graves who, in the immediate post-war years, was suffering the effects of neurasthenia. Quite possibly, the move, suggested by the transplanted Americans, from the logic of language was simply a step too far for Graves. Indeed, Graves' Oxford B.Litt thesis was entitled "The Illogical Element in English Poetry" (and later proved to be an inspiration for William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*). In it, he argues against logical content but always for logical syntax.

Graves' earnest requirements for logical syntax, as Paul Fussell observes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, are suggestive of a parallel for sensible living:

As a memoirist, Graves seems most interested not in accurate recall but in recovering moments when he most clearly perceives the knavery of knaves and foolishness of fools. For him as for D. H. Lawrence, knavery and folly are the style of the war, and one of the very worst things about it is that it creates a theatre perfectly appropriate for knavery and folly. It brings out all the terrible people. (219-20)

Knavery and folly: the watchwords of "illogic", after being so successfully sent-up in Graves' autobiography, become the subjects for his best-known historical novels, *I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God* and *Count Belisarius*. However, as this work will argue, the narrative strategies that allowed Graves to make such good use of his historical subjects for, at the same time, a humorous look at distant societies, also provided him with a vehicle for judging his own.

This strategy is revealed most clearly in the connection between Graves' biography of Lawrence and the notion of the "sensible" general, Count Belisarius. This connection will be explored more fully in chapter five; however, as the reviewer Charles Beaumont⁴ observed in his review of Graves' *Lawrence and the Arabs*, "Students of war may laugh at Lawrence's methods, who only fought a pitched battle once as a joke, and who at no other time attacked or held a position if there was a risk of losing a man" (223). Such an un-warlike style of warring became, for the

⁴ Christopher St. John Sprigg's pseudonym.

neurasthenic Graves, an ideal that certain other historical figures also managed to achieve. For that, they receive Graves' praise.

The historical novels which follow the pattern equating sense with illogic as a virtuous formula for pursuit and adventure, *Hercules*, *My Shipmate* (*The Golden Fleece*) and *King Jesus*, extend Graves' critique from purely secular affairs to what were to him pressing theistic subjects as well. *Hercules*, *My Shipmate* introduces the ideas for *The White Goddess* which Graves later developed into his famous thesis for the "historical grammar of poetic myth". In the novel, the Argonaut quest is for a new religion which devalues and displaces the most ancient of "illogical" worships: that of the Triple Goddess. Similarly, in *King Jesus*, Graves offers that same quest in a different environment demonstrating how myth, legend and history are repeated, how they are simply recycled and must, therefore, all point to a singular precedent which is the one true story: that of the struggle for supremacy between the spiritual followers of the sensibly illogical matriarch and those who chose to follow a patriarchal belief in logic, time and the suppression of poetic spirit.

Ultimately, in each of these novels, including his own autobiography, the protagonist of the story is seen to be a failure, a tragic figure who suffers for his pains. Jesus, while on the one hand being the logical conclusion of Graves' development of the male hero, is also the greatest failure. While he is successful in establishing God's kingdom on earth, as was his goal, he, personally, fails in his humanitarian quest for creating a world of peace and harmony since the faith he has chosen, that of a patriarchal supremacy, is fundamentally at odds with what Graves perceived to be the natural, matriarchal, order of the world.

The subsequent chapters will examine how and why each of these heroes fails and what was the cause of their failure: from his early works which suggest that they failed because of their inability to function within an intolerant and patriarchally led society and government, to his later works which suggest that the wrath of the Triple Goddess undid the deeds of his heroes who, mistakenly, believed in the logic and supremacy of patriarchy.

The next chapter will engage an examination of his poetic writings and his writings on poetry. It will carry forward the notion that the literary practices that Graves was exposed to in the early post-war years were the seed for the narrative structures and conception of the hero which followed in his later and more mature works.

Chapter three will deal with his short fiction and make connections with some of the works discussed above. *The Shout*, specifically, will be examined as an example of a narrative which threatens Graves' usual place as a traditional, anti-modernist, writer. Two other short stories, both of which are based in the Roman period, will also be examined as works which were written to commission many years after Graves' successful historical novels had been published. Through these shorter works, Graves' methodology and formula for historical fiction become patently clear since Graves, at this stage, was clearly constructing clever stories but more so as an artisan than an artist.

Chapters four and five of this study will examine those of Graves' historical novels based upon Roman history. *I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God* and *Count Belisarius* all deal with political themes—themes which, as an anonymous reviewer for *The Times* pointed out, are not so very different from those of the time in which

Graves was writing the books: “Mr. Graves’s new novel, *Count Belisarius*, which deals with the Empire of the East under Justinian, discovers few other differences between that life and our own” (April 8, 1938). Through the fictionalisation of a hazy and murky historical past, Graves condemns contemporary society and offers examples by which the world can mend its ways. Invariably, references can be found which will claim that the root of the troubles is a result of society being run on the basis of an “unnatural” patriarchal system. All too often, within Graves’ novels, such as *Hercules*, *My Shipmate*, an awareness of, and a complicity with, such a patriarchal system is enough to condemn its hero(es).

Graves also believed that somewhere within our language, and especially our mythic language, there remains (here Empson’s contrast with the Jungian system is useful) an aspect of our beliefs dedicated to the Goddess despite the efforts of Western systems of philosophy and religion to displace them with a faith for reason and economics. The most obvious example, as Graves offers, of “goddess” worship which has been traditionally overlooked by patriarchally led theological revisionists was “the gradual introduction of Virgin-worship ...” which is a “modification” by Rome of “Hebrew monotheism” (*White*, 475). These mono and patri-theistic systems of worship confound societies’ “natural” pre-disposition to praise the White Goddess.

As Graves points out, what emerges from our psyche, or what can be induced from our psyche, is a return to the “natural” language of Muse-worship which will defeat the artificial Aristotelian language of science:

There are two distinct and complementary languages: the ancient, intuitive language of poetry, rejected under Communism, merely mis-spoken elsewhere, and the more modern, rational language or prose, universally

current. Myth and religion are clothed in poetic language; science, ethics, philosophy and statistics in prose. A stage in history has now been reached when it is generally conceded that the two languages should not be combined into a single formula... (480)

However, as chapter six will demonstrate, Graves believed there was a time when all the languages were bound by a single formula—a language that could only speak of “one story”: this is the subject for *Hercules*, *My Shipmate*.

Through the *Hercules* novel, not only does Graves posit his belief that the Argonaut saga was, in fact, an earthly struggle for Zeus (patriarch) versus Hera (matriarch) as supreme in Mediterranean belief systems, but he also offers “logical” and “reasoned” explanations for miracles in myths. The confusion between “perfectly logical” events with magical events exists precisely because language and culture did not distinguish between the two. As shall be demonstrated, Graves manages to re-draw and re-assess the distinctions through a didactic and reasoned explanation of the mythological traditions while managing to maintain a gripping story.

Graves’ method of analeptically⁵ researching history does not have much to do with the academically rigorous techniques employed by the critics with whom he

⁵ Graves understood and used the term “analeptic”, generally understood to mean “restorative”, somewhat uniquely. For Graves, analeptic thought required him to think, as it were, in terms contemporary to the period about which he wrote. He would then restore history by asking his “contemporaries” how things had really been. Though, on the surface, this seems a rather peculiar practice, what Graves was in fact doing was steeping himself in history and then relating to his subject according

fought so viciously. Few serious scholars believe that Graves really could analeptically cast himself back in time, and it is more likely that he was simply masking the serious scholarly research that went into his more contentious works to create and maintain a certain public image of himself as an almost mystical diviner of truths. After all, it would not do much good for Graves to posit a need for a return to matrilineal family system and an ancient form of Goddess worship based on empirical evidence against Apollonian and empirical logicians.

Nevertheless, when attacked, Graves had a habit of publicly responding to his naysayers by positing his scholarship and “good sense”. For example, one reviewer of *King Jesus* takes exception to a detail that he claims Graves has invented: “... since it was customary to tear garments as a sign of mourning upon hearing blasphemy, Graves invents what he calls ‘blasphemy seams’...” (*Commentary*, 392). Graves wrote a rebuttal for the subsequent issue of *Commentary*:

I have no access to Hebrew books of reference at the moment, but any competent Talmudist will be able to assure Mr. Chertoff that substantial citizens of Jesus’s day did not wastefully rip and rend their clothes in savage fury, when anything went wrong. They opened a seam as a token tearing, like sensible men. (85)

Sense, it seems, is the binding and dominant influence for Graves’ re-readings. The more logical and simple explanation for a historical mystery, the more likely it is that Graves will employ it.

to his understanding of how things were at a given time and place. Peter Ackroyd, for example, claims to do much the same.

Graves' logic, though, is highly eccentric. He persistently upset the principles of the literary and scholarly establishment in his writings and lectures and wrote polemical articles against what he saw as damaging Aristotelian logic. Graves, rather cheekily, even presented some of these opinions in a 1969 interview with the journal *Impact of Science on Society*:

Graves: ... my experience has set me against logic, because logic—from the Greek word *logikon*—means 'something which has been arranged in words.' And rhetoric meant using the power of words—as [Aristotle's] master Plato put it—to make the worse cause seem the better. Since words never wholly cover the phenomena to which they are applied those who rely on pure logic cannot be thinking truly.

Friedman: Well, how do you think truly, Mr. Graves? What would you recommend as the alternative to logical thinking?

Graves: Thinking poetically...

"Thinking poetically", for Graves, generally means thinking practically because practice, in an empirical sense, implies truth. If something can be done, or recreated, then it must be true. Therefore, there is no place for theoretical philosophy for Graves. Mysteries must have, like the tearing of the clothes by Hebrews upon hearing a blasphemy, a "logical" explanation.

Between the time that Graves published his first collection of poems, *Over the Brazier* (1916) and his last, *New Collected Poems* (1977), 61 years and millions of words appeared under his name for the general public's consumption. Over those 61 years, Graves led a colourful life which brought him in and out of the public eye, vaulted him to the status of a war hero and poet, rumours of a Nobel Prize

nomination, brought him the Oxford Poetry Chair, led him to present the lauded Cambridge Clark Lecture series and, rather uncommonly for a poet, made him a celebrity who mingled with famous figures from cinema and politics like Ava Gardner, David Ben-Gurion and others. As a poet, Graves has, posthumously, maintained a following amongst those who praise him as the century's greatest love poet; and by those who are fascinated by the esoteric traditions underlying his poetical theories presented in *The White Goddess*. Indeed, though not as often or as passionately, there are those who argue that Graves, as poet, is one of the most significant of this century.

Graves' poetical output was, indeed, formidable. By the time his last collection of poems was published in 1977, Graves had produced 55 editions of new or collected poems. In addition, he had also written 21 books or collections of essays on the subject of poetry. These achievements, in themselves, constitute an extremely productive life's work. However, his production as a novelist was also prodigious. Between 1925 and 1965, Graves wrote 17 novels and published two selections of short stories. When one also adds his autobiography, *Good-Bye to All That*, and his biography of T.E. Lawrence, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, then the number of his "creative" prose works expands.

If, as numerous critics have noted, Graves' *The White Goddess* is essential to an understanding of his poetry, then one should also consider the works within the subject areas of myth and history in his novels based on those histories and myths. The texts that Graves wrote, either by himself or collaboratively, on biblical subjects, including his studies on Jesus, *Jesus in Rome*, *King Jesus* and textual reconstructions such as *The Hebrew Myths* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* as well as works on

mythology such as *The Greek Myths*, are also important in this vein. Clearly, while Graves may have believed he was foremost a poet and only a few measures later a novelist or a scholar, there seems enough reason, if only because of the number of works produced and their place in the popular twentieth-century canon, that they be given attention.

Not surprisingly, over the years in which he wrote vast quantities of published prose, contradictions between his various dictums on poetry, society, myth and history occasionally appeared. However, despite the variety of his output, many of his critics are interested in pigeon-holing Graves into one of two or three categories. But Graves was more than just a love poet, he was more than someone with a fascination with the concept of the poet's muse, and he was more than a war poet, or a Georgian poet, or a historical novelist, or a classicist while at the same time, always being at least a little bit of each of these. One significant factor which seems to have caused problems with Graves' reputation in scholarly communities is, as Douglas Day pointed out more than 30 years ago, that there is a "... tendency of literary historians to concern themselves only with those poets whom they can more or less neatly classify as members of readily identifiable 'groups' or 'movements'" (Day, xii). While Day is writing of the treatment of poets specifically, the same judgement can be levelled against those critics dealing with novels and novelists.

The intention of this introductory chapter has been to outline some of the assumptions which have generally been made about Graves' work and to show how these can and should be revised. Furthermore, some general precepts about Graves' narrative techniques and how he came about discovering them have also been demonstrated. The subsequent chapters will show how these precepts came to be

used and developed by Graves as his own novel writing techniques developed.

However, before proceeding, the next chapter must first redress the principal cause for many of the assumptions that are made about Graves today: Graves and his opinion of the role of the poet in society, for it is upon that idealised role that the reader will find the majority of Graves' heroes are based.

Chapter Two

Robert Graves' Model for the Poetic Ideal: the Hero as Poet / Poet as Hero

Slawomir Mrozek, a Polish playwright of the 1960s, best known for his play *Tango*, created a character, Arthur, some of whose speeches epitomise Robert Graves' attitudes toward much of the poetry being written contemporaneously to his own:

You've been kicking over the totems for so long that there's nothing left for me to kick against—nothing! Abnormality is the new norm, and all I've got to rebel against is you and your muck. (Mrozek, 27)

Ironically, when Mrozek's iconoclastic hero makes the conclusion that in his society, "abnormality is the new norm," a Gravesian audience may be forgiven for associating Arthur's judgement with one that might have been levelled by Robert Graves himself.

The parallels between Graves and Arthur do not end with a loosely thematic connection though. Arthur, like Graves, for all his conservative tendencies, is considered a radical by his family. Similarly, throughout his career, Graves was known for railing against the orthodoxies of his contemporary literary community while being considered by that same community as practising a rather dated and conventional orthodoxy of his own. For example, the Anglo-American literary community that saw Graves as a recalcitrant romantic, from a Victorian tradition of

education and authorship, Graves determined was populated by weak-minded and false poets—who included poets and writers as various, in his opinion, as Pound, Eliot, Auden⁶, and Joyce. This same group of poets saw in Graves an embodiment of the very traditions which they were rebelling against. Graves, in turn, was revolting against their revolution just like Arthur.

Graves' "traditionalism", however, can hardly be considered conventional. In a conclusion which must have frustrated the modernists about whom he wrote and which epitomises Graves' attitude toward their movement, Graves finds in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (written with Laura Riding) that amongst the modernist movement's practitioners, "... composition just manages to escape with its life—beginning again and again in spite of its posthumous classicism" (291). In other words, Graves believed that poets such as Cummings and Stevens, despite their modernist tendency for poetical innovation, were bound to write verse which was rooted in the sort of classicism their movement had tried to avoid, because:

Wherever attempts at sheer newness in poetry were made they merely ended in dead movements. Yet the new feeling in criticism [within modernism] did achieve something. It is true in the more extreme cases that by turning into a critical philosophization of itself, poetry ceased to be poetry: it became poetically introspective philosophy. But this was perhaps necessary before

⁶It is important to note that Auden was very influenced by Graves' early poetry and Eliot was instrumental in publishing *The White Goddess*. However, despite the poets' favourable view of Graves, he refused to reciprocate.

poetry could be normal without being vulgar, and deal naturally with truth without being trite. (265)

Graves' "conservative" poetic revolution is fundamentally based on a conviction that all "true" poetry—poetry that Graves considered to be meritorious, at least—is grounded in a common theme. That theme, as is discussed below, engenders a poetic tradition of which even modernism, despite its penchants for newness and innovation, must be a part if it is to survive the wear of time and a Gravesian measure for poetical soundness. And Graves, in 1927, thought modernism did so. The few modernists whom Graves accepted at this time as practitioners of "true" poetry he showed to be sympathetic to his notion of what a poet's responsibility was to his or her public.

Graves' and Riding's *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* generally attempts to find a measure of praise for writers such as e.e. cummings and Wallace Stevens despite the fact that Graves later indicts many of the same poets for writing counter to his own poetical ideologies. These ideologies came to include, first and foremost, an absolute dedication to the White Goddess. However, in these pre-Goddess years, where Graves finds merit in modernist poetry is in its acceptance of classical roots as a part of a poetical tradition. Invariably, Graves came to find in such roots a heritage of poetry dedicated to the Muse, his White Goddess. Graves believed that it was through a misdirected connection to classicism that the movement damned itself to an inevitable "death" by disavowing the only poetical traditions which are capable of standing the test of time.

Graves' references to classicism, natural verse, truth and true poets throughout *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* are important. While his theories on the White Goddess were not formalised for another twenty-one years, certain trends toward that

unifying thesis can be found in his writings at even this early stage of his career. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, in the themes and narratives of two of his early prose-fictional works, *The Shout* and *My Head! My Head!*, written at about the time as *A Survey*, notions of the Goddess are detectable. While the themes do not yet come to dominate his work as they will do by the thirties, they are, nonetheless, clearly present.

Searching for root elements of the Goddess within Graves' early work should not be considered an overly prescriptive practice. Graves was resolute in his belief that through classicism, history and archaeology one can be led to a recovery of the key to a tradition of poetic thought which transgresses boundaries of culture, language and history and crosses into a terrain of a universal thematic harmony. As he makes clear throughout his study of the "historical grammar of poetic myth", the subtitle of *The White Goddess*, entry into the clan of "true poets" is barred to all those who have not taken the time to first learn the secrets of the Muse whom "All saints revile" (*Collected Poems*, 156).⁷ All "true" poetry, Graves reasons, will "celebrate the Mountain Mother," and "true" poets will learn to hear that "every song-bird shout[s] awhile for her ..." (157).

Those who know the classics and accept and absorb their traditions are more likely to unlock the sacred Bardic secrets which will endow the educated poet with the tools with which to write "true" poetry dedicated to, and inspired by, the Muse.

⁷ All future references that are explicitly made to Graves' poems will assume that they are from the 1975 edition of the *Collected Poems* unless otherwise stated. Where the source is not obvious, a volume and page number will be provided.

Such poetry, according to Graves, will not be manufactured but will grip the poet in a creative fever, despite the desires that he or she may have for experimentation and newness—a fever which will produce poetry that speaks of “one story and one story only” (*Collected Poems*, 137).

An obligation to historical myth is not an uniquely Gravesian project though. Arguably, modernists such as James Joyce, in works like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, utilise myth in much the same way as Graves. Significantly, the difference between the two authors lies not only in stylistics, but also in the uncertainty and scepticism with which the more overtly modernist writer treats history. James Fairhall argues that:

... the first sentence of *A Portrait* encompasses elements of many stories:

Greek and Irish myths, the story of Stephen’s development into an artist, John Joyce’s retold tale of the magical cow, and James Joyce’s story of his own development into an artist. History and story, life and art intermingle. ...

The novel’s second sentence—“His father told him that story”—reminds us of the fabricated nature of the first. (Fairhall, 113)

Equally, Graves is aware of the fabricated nature of myth *as stories*. In the introduction to *The Greek Myths*, Graves suggests studying Greek mythology through “... primitive Italian, Irish, Welsh and Scandinavian myths ... since these have been, on the whole, less severely edited than the Greek” (11). In other words, Graves is only too aware that myths have suffered from emendations and their source-origins (like those of Shakespeare’s poetry as discussed below) are virtually untraceable because of the constant rewriting of the myths and the poetry by scribes who were not sensitive to either history or the history of language. However, he also insists that

“Greek mythology was no more mysterious in content than are modern election cartoons” (22) and, presumably, just as one needs to know who and what is being mocked and characterised in a political cartoon, one should know the original subject of the myth in order for it to be fully understood by the modern reader. Similarly, according to Graves, Biblical legends, especially those of Jesus, need to be read in conjunction with a greater anthropological understanding of their historical basis if they are to be understood at all.

This latter point is where Graves seems most distant from his modernist contemporaries. Where Joyce or Eliot can appreciate and apply an understanding of myths from a psychoanalytic perspective to their works, Graves prefers the more empirical approach of the archaeologist: “A true science of myth should begin with a study of archaeology, history, and comparative religion, not in the psycho-therapist’s consulting-room” (22).

A short section of “Little Gidding” from Eliot’s *Four Quartets* serves as a ready example of the uncertainty and scepticism of a modernist’s reading of history in contrast to that of an empiricist such as Graves:

History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

In the quoted passage, Eliot describes the unconscious process involved in re-writing myth and history through, or rather from, the mind of the poet. Histories and myths do have a place in the poet’s realm but they, for the modernist, must be accepted for what they are: subjective, individual, and the product of the individual in his/her

particular circumstance not, as Graves makes it seem, the result of something approaching a Jungian collective unconscious and reflective of a universal societal condition.

In fact, the complication between the two approaches may be taken even further. Laurence Coupe writes that “For Eliot myth connotes tragic restraint ...” (45). Coupe suggests that Eliot’s editorials in *The Criterion* were a constant reminder for his readers to remember “... a classical ideal of ‘reason’” (44) but that Eliot’s notion of reason was considered by some, like Rickword, to be more akin to restraint which was ideologically contrary to Rickword’s hope for myth to be used “... to create ‘an unbiased but self-consistent, humorous universe’” (44). Graves would have been appalled. Myth, for Graves, was history. And history, if it was to mean anything, needed to instruct. Subjective, impressionistic or frivolous accounts of history, or myth, or of the classics, threatened the loss of lessons that society needed to learn.

In setting-up the assumption at the outset of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* that “poetry not characteristically ‘modernist’ presents no difficulty to the plain reader”, Graves and Riding advance the theory that the poetry of Cummings, for example, “... illustrate[s] the divorce of advanced contemporary poetry from the common-sense standards of ordinary intelligence...” and that such poetry is “... an insult to [ordinary intelligence]” (9). Presumably, by this, Graves and Riding are insinuating that poetry which is not modernist will always be understood—a conclusion which they would like their reader to accept for the duration of the discussion on Cummings. This, however, is a rhetorical ploy. Graves and Riding, in the third chapter of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, attempt to persuade their readers that the work of even the “plainest” of poets, Shakespeare, has beguiled his scholiasts by demonstrating that as

a result of an accumulation of alterations in spelling and punctuation his editors have affected the very way in which we receive Shakespeare's verse today.

Clearly, Graves felt the editors and transcribers of Shakespeare's verse did not grasp the true meaning of his poetry despite his "plainness". Graves argued that he and Riding could demonstrate, through a deductive process, Shakespeare's intended meaning by re-establishing his original punctuation and spelling. In other words, through Shakespeare, Graves recognised the tentativeness of actual meaning—recognised how easily it could be affected by time and rewriting—but also proposed that seeds and sources could always be uncovered, that the roots of any text, myth or history could be plainly seen if the right person were employed to detect the work's origins. This is the same methodology Graves employed to explain modernist verse to plain readers in defence of their rights and in an insinuation of the duty to the public neglected by the modernist poets.

A recurring usage of a deductive investigative method of the sort Graves employed led the critic Monroe K. Spears to label Graves as "a kind of historical Sherlock Holmes" ("Latest Graves", 665). Graves' sleuth-like method of recovering "original" meaning in Shakespeare's verse and the tracing of classical roots and the "unwritten originals" of modernist poetry mirror the method he applied in the re-inscription of mythic and biblical characters for his fictional novels and scholarly efforts. Graves' method involved first identifying a problem and then deducing solutions based on a careful reading and deployment of historical materials. So much seems reasonable; however, he also claimed he solved the majority of his puzzles by making "analeptic" leaps to the past in the guise of his speaker or narrator. At least,

this is how Graves describes his methodology in the historical commentary to *King Jesus*:

To write a historical novel by the analeptic method—the intuitive recovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time—one must train oneself to think wholly in contemporary terms. This is most easily done by impersonating the supposed author of the story, who has much the same function as the carefully costumed figure placed in the foreground of an architectural drawing to correct misapprehensions about its size, date and geographical position. (353-4)

Clearly, what Graves understood by the term “analeptic” is quite reasonable and will be discussed more fully elsewhere; however, his explanations for his methodology were not always so pragmatic, and it is often the opinions which were a little more loosely represented that were latched on to by his critics and posited as the opinions of a lunatic who was supposed to be a rational commentator on the poetry and history of the age.

Keeping Spears’ image of Graves as a literary “sleuth” in mind for the moment, an investigation into the analysis of Graves’ methodology by other critics will be valuable. Since there is very little written on Graves’ methodology for his novels, but a fair amount on that of his poetry, these commentaries will have to suffice. Snipes, Smeds and Leonard, do comment on his novels, but their findings will be used in later chapters where their analysis can be applied more directly.

In *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves and Muir*, Daniel Hoffman, refusing for the moment to divulge his opinion on the subject, commented upon Graves’ method of restoring poetry and legend to its original form

by offering a neo-Platonic dialogue between a professor and a poet who are discussing Graves' methodology:

Prof.: ... Do you know where he takes his warrant to 'restore' such a gamut of works from so many literatures?

Poet: From the divine inspiration of the poetic imagination. Surely you'll agree that however great a man's knowledge, without intuition he can't transform it into wisdom. And I imagine Graves was much encouraged in restoration by the success of a technique he worked out with Laura Riding at about the time of his first ballad book. (139)

Hoffman devises the "poet" for the dialogue from a pastiche of some of Graves' better-known commentary on poets and poetry while the "professor" is clearly a distillation of Graves' opponents and their critical judgements on his methods. While the manner in which Hoffman presents his materials is inventive and open to accusations of being overly speculative on his part, the chapter does provide a good summary of the arguments for and against Graves' technique. Principally, Hoffman, as the passage quoted above demonstrates, is suggesting that Graves' method is secondary to his intuitive grasp for poetry. This opinion, then, does not really advance a case which tries to argue that it is Graves' use of myth that charges his works with meaning. Rather, it suggests that Graves was successful in spite of his work on myth and simply because he was a good poet.

Hoffman seems, for the most part, to be sympathetic toward Graves.

However, another highly respected critic, William Empson, offered the most unadulterated praise for Graves' work. Empson asserted that despite Graves' intolerances for other poets and critics and his various eccentricities, "Modern literary

criticism was invented by a number of different people, but by Graves as much as any other individual" ("Eruption", 400). What Empson has said is not as important as what he subsequently did. He had in mind Graves' early work on poetry, his intuitive deduction of poetic meaning and his ability to restore the elided authorial intentions. According to Empson, Graves was able to coherently explicate what was ordinarily summarised as a sublime sensation felt by the reader who encountered pluralities of meanings in a poem. Graves' method is what Empson subsequently pursued so fervently in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*:

His earliest reflections of this topic ... implicitly acknowledges his debt to the Graves-Riding *Survey of Modernist Poetry* published just three years previously. Such criticism [the technique of verbal analysis] is only impressive, Empson writes,

when the analysis it employs becomes so elaborate as to score a rhetorical triumph; when each word in the line is given four or five meanings, four or five reasons for sounding right and suggesting the right things. Dazzled by the difficulty of holding it in your mind at once, you feel this at any rate is complicated enough, as many factors as these could make up a result apparently magical and incalculable.

(Norris, 11)

Most critics agree on the importance of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* to the study of twentieth-century literary criticism. Perhaps this work of criticism more than any other deserves the degree of praise that Empson has offered. The inventiveness that Empson admired so much is evidenced within the opening chapter of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* where Graves and Riding employ the sort of "intuitive" approach

summarised by Hoffman in the discussion between his poet and professor that goes on to become so relevant to his life's work: poetic intuition transformed into wisdom, into truth.

How much of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* was written as a word-by-word collaboration by Graves and Riding and if it was not, who can claim to be the principal author and intellectual motivator for its ideas, is an issue which continues to be the cause of much furore between the Riding and Graves camps. The fact is that the influence of the ideas in *A Survey* on Robert Graves' mind as a poet, mythographer and literary critic is clearly evidenced in his later works. To that end, it is important to investigate more closely what were the results of the author(s)'s labour.

Using their innovative method for uncovering "the truth", Graves and Riding demonstrate their interest in the sub-conscious sources of poetry through an analysis of cummings' verse "Sunset". They inform their readers that cummings is not really to be blamed for the complexities of his verse since, in the case of his poem "Sunset", "We are dealing ... with a modernism with apparently no feelings of obligation to the plain reader, undertaken, presumably, in the interests of poetry" (12). After rewriting cummings' poem in a more traditional meter and including prosodic features such as end-rhymes that are accepted within "conventional" poetry, Graves and Riding reveal to us the purpose of the exercise: "This version [the re-written] shows that Cummings (sic) was bound to write the poem as he did in order to prevent it from becoming what we have made it" (17). Graves and Riding, their humorous phrasing of the conclusion aside, have made a serious point: they admit that cummings was making the poem something new, but that at the same time, he had remained "true" to

a hidden convention more readily understandable to plain readers which they were able to uncover. The “hidden conventions”, of course, are the classical roots that Graves insisted are present in all true poetry.

Graves’ fascination with discoverable, yet evasive, truths was to remain with him through the remainder of his poetic career. Arguably, it was Graves’ persistent disruption of accepted beliefs that became a watermark for his works and which was to distinguish his efforts from those of his peers. Sir James Frazer, for example, is considered (in the entry on modernism) to be one of the most significant influences on modernist poets by the editors of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as a result of the publication of *The Golden Bough* which became, as they claim, a touchstone for many modernists. Indeed, there is little doubt of the work’s centrality and importance, not only to the period but to Graves himself. However, Frazer’s work had been published in its entirety by 1915 (with *Aftermath, a Supplement* appearing in 1936); and Yeats, whose work invoked the sort of mythic structures that Graves should have been sympathetic with, died in 1939. From 1939 onward, it seems that Graves had no contemporary counterpart for his investigative method for uncovering the sources of myth and the sort of mytho-historical literature that it produced.

Indeed, Graves’ *Poems 1938-1945* includes “To Juan at the Winter Solstice”, one of the first and arguably the most recognisable of the “Goddess” poems that Robert Graves ever produced. Significantly, he wrote and published the poem with the passing of his two most serious rival mythographers when it seemed he had no rival remaining in the field, and he could advance his theories more assertively. Furthermore, Graves had little regard for those like Yeats and Frazer who had come

before him because they were not dedicated to the true poet's task. Graves had discounted Yeats' contribution to poetry for reasons as flippant as his conviction that Yeats was greedy and impatient and suffered for a "lack of proportion, or humour..." (*Collected Writings*, 224) but also for reasons as personally genuine as Yeats' apparent disagreement with Graves and the poets who followed him and their conception of good poetry:

Yeats rejected Reeves [for his new anthology] with this really devilish comment:

Too reasonable, too truthful. We poets should be good liars,
remembering always that the Muses are women and prefer the embrace
of gay, warty lads. (*Collected Writings*, 225)

Poetry, according to Graves, always has an obligation to truth and reasonableness and to neglect those obligations meant jeopardising one's reputation and standing as a poet:

A poet's integrity, then, consists in his not forming ties that can impair his critical independence, or prevent him from telling the whole truth about anything, or force him to do anything out of character. It consists also in his refusal to pay more respect to persons than decency demands or their attainments permit. ("Integrity", 579)

Yeats, by implication, was practising poetry falsely and thereby had no right to pass judgement on others' verse or make attempts to suggest theories on the proper method of writing verse if his was so clearly heretical to the Goddess' needs.

Graves also makes reference to the shortcomings within Frazer's study throughout *The White Goddess* with statements such as:

Sir James Frazer was able to keep his beautiful rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge, until his death by carefully and methodically sailing all round his dangerous subject, as if charting the coastline of a forbidden island without actually committing himself to a declaration that it existed. (242)⁸

Again, according to Graves, Frazer was behaving untruthfully. Worse yet, Frazer was not a poet and yet his dictates were respected by a large poetic community. Since Frazer was bound to satisfy his institution, he was not, according to Graves, free enough to make the necessary conclusions which his theories implied and, therefore, shirked his duties. In other words, his public function was in conflict with his private beliefs.

While the merits of Frazer's and Yeats' works and the accuracy of their beliefs in mythological systems are, no doubt, open for argument, what is important for this study is that Graves did not think either author's efforts were significant or correct. Graves found each of their works to be wanting. His vitriolic attacks on his peers' work with myth suggests that Graves was frustrated that they followed the thinking of Yeats and Frazer *de facto*. Their allegiance to Frazer, especially, distanced his peers from an identification of, and dedication to, the only "true" poetic subject which he himself had so dutifully uncovered.

Yeats' and Frazer's works on myth remain better known than Graves'; yet, it can be seen that Graves, from a very early stage in his literary career, was ready and

⁸All references made to *The White Goddess* are assumed to be from the 1961 Faber edition. Where other versions are used, specifically Grevel Lindop's Carcanet edition, the variation will be noted by reference to the publication year.

eager to do battle with literary “conventions”. His enemies in the literary community included those whose “conventional” works foreshadow Graves’ own discoveries. Much as the validity of Graves’ disagreement with Yeats and Frazer is not particularly important to this study; neither is the correctness of Graves’ opinions on modernism, modernist poets or any of Graves’ other contemporaries. What is important is the substance of Graves’ issue with these groups, how firmly Graves maintained these beliefs, and what such beliefs meant to Graves, and how, in turn, critics came to view Graves’ beliefs. The relationship between poet and critic, especially during a poet’s lifetime, has a rather obvious impact on the work that that poet produces. Graves was by no means immune to the influence of critical fashions; though, he did tend to prefer to position himself against any current trends.

The image of Graves as a combatant whose enemy was what he perceived to be a slack literary community is recognisable in works written as early as *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) and *On English Poetry* (1922). One must ask, for example, what exactly it was that Graves and Riding had uncovered in their analysis of cummings’ poem and what they hoped to prove by their “discovery”. As they themselves admit, they had turned “Sunset” into a poem of “Stale phrases such as ‘vesper wind’ and ‘silver seas’ [that] have come to mean so little that they scarcely do their work in the poem” (17). Graves and Riding believed that cummings had managed to turn an old poetical subject such as a sunset into something new by his linguistic and prosodic innovations, something which can be appreciated once more by readers who have experienced sunsets and poems about sunsets countless times before; however, any such new imagery will not be understood by the reader before he or she is inducted into the method of the poetry’s newness.

In this conclusion, Graves shows himself to have a respect for poetical innovation, for the principles of modernism, and for change. Graves might have, indeed, held traditional values toward poetry in a higher esteem than his contemporaries; however, he was not, as he was accused by so many, entirely resistant to change either. Nevertheless, Graves' commentary on the desire amongst the modernists for classicism to be classified as "posthumous" must be considered as a sarcastic slight. All of the poets who receive Graves' and Ridings' praise are also found by them to have classical elements (always positive according to the pair) in their poems. By ferreting out the presence of classical elements in avant-garde poetry and positing them as a positive aspect of their creation, Graves is, though almost certainly unwittingly, at this stage of his career, undermining the very effectiveness of the modernist project.

However, Graves did not limit his attacks on modernism to the sort of subtle play with criticism and interpretation that he performs in *A Survey*. As early on in his long career as the 1930s, Edith Sitwell commenting on Graves' vitriolic criticism of modern poets and their works wrote, "What's wrong with Robert Graves? He has now insulted, and very grossly, almost every poet of our time" (Stade, 6). Graves, it seems, like Mrozek's Arthur, perceived himself as someone who had re-discovered a heritage and a system of values lost to the twentieth century by the needless innovation and the shoddy scholarship of those whom the literary community had come to value most. Much in the same way that Mrozek's Arthur, who becomes increasingly desperate to overturn his parents' radicalism with a restrained conservatism, begins to appear increasingly pathetic and futile, Graves' point-of-view was (and still is) frowned upon in many literary circles.

A view, which is perhaps more critically sound than Sitwell's bitter lament, comes from Monroe K. Spears, who writes within his essay on Graves' poetry and poetical criticism:

... the consequences of applying the Muse religion to criticism ... involves ... judgement by the subject and by the author's biography. Both these criteria are of the kind most thoroughly discredited by modern criticism; no doubt Graves enjoys taking up these heretical postures, but the results are no more than momentarily amusing or irritating. [The Oxford Addresses] must have been very successful lectures, but they are hardly worth preserving. ("Latest Graves", 671)

Spears has, rather handily, summarised one of the principal reasons for Graves' neglect. Graves' critical method has not, since the twenties, been in keeping with contemporary critical methods or that of their practitioners.

Empson's opinion of Graves is a rare exception in that he not only heaped tremendous praise on him, but even included an acknowledgement to Graves for inspiring his critical method for his hugely influential *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. That Empson continued to praise Graves into the fifties may lead one to conclude that his views may be considered partial because, like Graves, Empson was vaunted by the Movementers as an essential figure to the development of contemporary (in the fifties) poetry. The Movement poets aside, acknowledgements to Graves are rare—rare even in the field of myth and the classics, never mind the highly fickle Parnassus occupied by literary critics and others within their trade.

Perhaps one explanation for Sitwell's frustrated diatribe against Graves' outbursts was that it does not seem, on the surface, that in the twenties and thirties the

poets whom Graves was condemning are all that different in their aspirations and ideals from Graves himself. Furthermore, Edith Sitwell had received a just measure of praise from Graves and Riding in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* when she was compared, as an author of “genuine” poetry with the likes of Eliot and Cummings against the “... spurious individuality of, say, Dr. William Carlos Williams” (201). But these same poets were later to become, in Graves’ opinion, equally as “spurious” as Williams. In fact, the modernist movement, *en masse*, eventually found themselves damned by Graves. Most important, though, is the confusion Sitwell may have had for differentiating Graves’ method from that of the modernists.

Ezra Pound serves as a convenient example for the sort of writer whose themes (but certainly not style) might be confused with Graves’ upon a cursory examination. Commenting on Pound’s relationship with history and culture and quoting from Pound’s “Canto LXXXI”, G.S. Fraser wrote:

... he has his own kind of religion, a cult of the high and heroic moments in human history, of the great civilizations and the great codes: his answer to disaster is an attempt to strengthen us by making us remember triumph:

What thou lovest well remains,

the rest is dross

What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee

What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage

Whose world, or mine or theirs

or is it of none?

First came the seen, then thus the palpable

Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,

What thou lovest well is thy true heritage (*Modern*, 18-19)

The “high heroic moments” and the “great codes” in the history of human civilisation are the very events that Graves was interested in isolating through his anthropological investigations. However, as Fraser makes clear, Pound also wanted us to believe in “... nature, to see the proportions and models of human achievement in the natural world ...” (19). Had Fraser continued by quoting the subsequent lines from the canto, his point may have become more clear:

Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.

Learn of the green world what can be thy place

In scaled invention or true artistry,

Pull down thy vanity,

Paquin pull down!

The green casque has outdone your elegance. (Pound, 180)

Pound’s interest in nature as the place and source of supreme “elegance” is where Graves and Pound so clearly come apart. Graves believed that humanities’ “high heroic moments” and “great codes” were to be found in what William Empson has described as a form of “Jungian ‘racial memory,’” which, as Graves believed, “the human psyche [could not] get on without” (Empson, “Eruption”, 400). In other words, Graves’ concern was not in the least with the natural world; rather, his concern was with myth and how the human psyche created, organised and related to myths which he considered an omnipresent aspect of the human condition—an exploration which Graves considered one of the primary duties of the poet.

Though Pound was interested in historical and cultural sources, there is another fundamental division between Graves and Pound that is not to be bridged. In

Graves' most formative years, the only "human achievements" he knew of—as a combatant and twice-wounded infantry officer in the trenches of the Western Front—were destructive. The "true heritage" that Pound wants us to "love" is more immediate and direct than the "heritage" to which Graves refers. Pound's is in the world-at-hand; Graves' is in the myth-behind-history-at-large. In other words, Pound, as the *Cantos* show, believed in the revelation of truth and tradition through an almost Romantic appreciation of the sublimity of nature while Graves' revelations were provided through an examination of a distant and nearly forgotten past. This schism leaves so fundamental a binary opposition there is little wonder that the two poets rarely share the same appreciative audience.

More broadly, the substantive difference regarding the question of myth between Graves and the modernists lies in what Laurence Coupe identifies as the question of "roots" (31). Eliot quite clearly expressed his preference for Frazer's methodology to that of "direct experience and documentation" of ethnographers like Malinowski whom Coup describes as "modern 'functionalist' anthropologists" (31). Graves seemed to show a preference for "functionalist" anthropology but only when it supported his more contentious proposals; however, by and large, Graves' *The White Goddess* is written in the same tradition as Frazer's. Eliot's championing the publication of *The White Goddess* by Faber and Faber is a testament to his belief that it was a part of a continuing inspirational tradition.

Somewhat curiously, while Malinowski was clearly influenced and inspired by Frazer (the introduction to his *Myth in Primitive Psychology* dedicates the work to Frazer), his methodology was clearly very different. In that same work, Malinowski insisted upon "... the examination of a typical Melanesian culture and by a survey of

the opinions, traditions, and behaviour of these natives ..." (11). Based on this approach, he "... propose[d] to show how deeply the sacred tradition, the myth, enters into their pursuits, and how strongly it controls their moral and social behaviour" (11). Malinowski, then, based his derivative conclusion on myth from direct observation of behaviour as an antecedent expression of the memory of a mythic racial behaviour. This, however, particularised issues too much for both Graves and the modernists. As Coupe points out, "Where [functional anthropology] referred to 'cultures' and the way they worked, [Eliot] inferred from *The Golden Bough* the existence of 'culture', essential and universal" (31). The key to Coupe's analysis of Eliot's position is in the "essential" and "universal" aspects of mythology and not that which is limited, as Malinowski proposed, to a singular island which might be thought to represent the consciousness of a "savage" race.

Nevertheless, Graves' privileging of pagan religions and belief systems over those of the Judeo-Christian tradition rankled the critics. Judging by the reviews of Graves' publications throughout his career as a poet and a novelist, professional judges of his poetry were more likely than those assessing his fictional works to be hostile. The increased hostility is probably a result of the fact that the majority of Graves' fiction (especially those works published in the late forties and fifties) is more overtly connected to his theories on myth and religion than his poetry which can be read purely as inoffensive verse on the subject of love.

A fascinating collection of Graves' poetry worth examining from the perspective of varying critical responses is his *Poems 1938-1945* not least because it included the first Goddess poems. However, while the poems in the collection often deal with the question of the Goddess, there are also a number of poems which also

seem to reflect some of the themes of his biographical and autobiographical writings. The presence of these themes in this volume suggests that Graves was in the process of re-evaluating his former opinions and serve as a transition into his later, post-Goddess novels.

Uniquely, *Poems 1938-1945* has been reviewed over a period of some 25 years. This temporal range allows an insight to how attitudes to Graves, his poetry and his poetical theories have shifted over time. First reviewed in its publication year, the slim volume was revived for review by Alan Bold in 1970. Critical reactions to the volume have varied. The influential scholar, Randall Jarrell, writing on the collection suggested that

anyone at all interested in poetry should buy *Poems 1938-45*, by Robert Graves, if only to get one poem, "To Juan at the Winter Solstice." ... It is far and away the best poem in the book; ... but what the [other] poems say is sometimes wonderfully and sometimes rather disastrously the expression of his own peculiar being. (*Partisan*, 491)

Jarrell has identified what seems a significant feature of Graves' poetical writings in his review. He observes that the poems are "sometimes wonderfully" and "sometimes rather disastrously the expression of [Graves'] own peculiar being". Perhaps Jarrell's recognition that one cannot separate Graves' presence from the poems allows Jarrell to react, for the most part, in favour to the collection. In this sense, Graves' work is enhanced by an allowance of—even an aim toward—an inclusion of the sort of cultural accretions discussed in the previous chapter. However, these accretions must respect Graves' consuming theories on myth and society and the poet's part in explicating these for his contemporaries.

The most significant feature of Jarrell's review is his identification of "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" as the most important poem in the volume. Michael Kirkham makes a similar observation:

'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' ... though obscure in some of its incidental allusions, is clear in its general import, and its images have an emotional power and suggestiveness which lose only a little in precise significance from an incomplete knowledge of sources—much can be inferred from the poem itself. (199)

Kirkham suggests that the poem is a "stand alone" work—one which can be read without a reader knowing all of Graves' sources; however, he also concludes that "[the poem] provides one of the fullest accounts in the poetry of the Theme" (199). "The Theme" is, obviously, Graves' notion of the function of "true poetry" and for a clear understanding of that, one needs to read much more of Graves as Douglas Day suggests:

As a brief paraphrase will show, a good example of this need for a familiarity with Graves's prose investigations is "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" ... which happens also to be perhaps the best of all Graves's magical poems. ... The one story is, of course, that of the White Goddess and her changing relations with her lovers; ... As powerful as Graves's magical poems are, they exist, like "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," mostly on one level: that of awed celebration of the Goddess and her mysteries. (175-7)

As Day suggests, by weaving a knowledge of Graves and of Graves' writings with the images and emblems in the poems, the reader's experience can only be enriched. However, Day may have been too reverent to Graves' own ideas about his poetry

when he suggests that his poetry is only “awed” of the Goddess. On the contrary, the Goddess, it seems, was the poetical subject through which broader issues could be addressed.

These broader issues include both the personal subject of the poetry as well as its social contexts. The contexts can be readily identified within the collection where Jarrell sees Graves manifesting his “peculiar being”. Not surprisingly, at the time of writing the *Poems 1938-1945* collection, Graves must have been an anguished spirit and that anguish certainly manifests itself in a number of the poems throughout the volume. As a veteran of the First World War, Graves must have been horrified to witness the world in the throes of another large-scale human slaughter, one which also took the life of his son, David. His frustration is made manifestly clear in the poetry of the volume, and his nascent concerns with the Goddess phenomenon became blended in the volume with the more public issues of the war.

The mingling of private and public self in his writings is a feature of Graves’ works that will be examined more closely below; however, it should be noted that failing to allow for Graves’ personal involvement in his public writings (though not in the style of poet laureate orations since these are clearly addressed to a broad public on a prescribed rather than personally motivated issue) can influence a critic to read Graves and find him unsatisfactory.

Monroe K. Spears, who is quite clearly not content with Graves’ poetical works, recognises the importance of interweaving biographical details with Graves’ poetry in order to achieve a fuller understanding. Spears’ assessment, as quoted above, is that Graves’ writing demands “judgement by the ... author’s biography ... [a method] thoroughly discredited by modern criticism”. The result of a critic ignoring

the biographical element in Graves can result in a review such as Robert Lowe's.

Lowe reviewed the same collection of poems as Jarrell had done several months later in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Lowe had little good to write about the volume save for its "technical mastery". His review concludes:

...his work is by no means a display of technical mastery; few contemporary poets are more concerned with content than he is. ... but without more of a sensuous surface than he sometimes gives, his poetry becomes annoyingly abstract and general, and is hard to remember, expert though it is. (100-1)

The accusation levelled by Lowe of Graves' poems lacking "sensuousness" is a serious one. This judgement is echoed by Alan Bold in a review written nearly twenty-five years later in *The Southern Review* where Bold concludes:

Because he is a superb polemicist who can intimidate would-be critics of his work, Graves is seldom discussed. When he is, he commands respect but seldom arouses enthusiasm ... He is erudite about the things that matter to him, technically impeccable, and completely admirable in his single-minded fortitude. As a poet, however, he is seldom memorable. Like a superbly fit athlete who has never yet managed to break any new records, he is still trying. Perhaps he will get to the top, but on past performance it seems sadly unlikely. (852)

Both critics dislike for the collection might come down to resisting the perceived dependence on the liberal humanist fallacy of requiring extra-textual biographical evidence that, in turn, affects both the poems' meanings and the critics' judgement of them. Judging by what is written in their reviews, Bold and Lowe seem simply not to like Graves. As a result, their opinion of his poetry is affected by their dislike of

Graves and what he had to say about poets and poetry with which they were enamoured—just the sort of extra-textuality that their scientific method ought to have abandoned.

The critical reception of his various works was not always harmonious, but comments throughout all three of Graves' principal biographers' studies make reference to the remarkably strong sales of both his poetry and his prose despite their mixed reviews. Martin Seymour-Smith, for example, observes that despite the somewhat uncertain reviews of the 1938-1945 collection,

... the book went into a new impression in April 1946. It sold altogether 7500 copies in Britain; Creative Age Press quickly sold out their edition, of 5500.

Many poets then more fashionable were selling fewer copies of their collections. (411)

R.P. Graves cites the identical figures in the third volume of his biography (109) while Miranda Seymour observes that "[Graves'] own celebrity was growing. His 1938-1945 collection of poems, widely read, had won admiration for the section in which he celebrated both his new love for Beryl and his sense of a universal, unending myth known only to poets" (328). A dependency upon the latter was destined to make or to break Graves' reputation with his critics and so to further his image of the poet's public duties. These, increasingly, took on heroic qualities as Graves' public mission was to champion the cause of matriarchy and illogic over the power of Mammon.

That his struggle began to take on more and more personal proportions may be as a result of his own burgeoning popularity as a poet. The opinion of his work held by both readers and critics was very important to Graves and while his readership was

growing, his critical favour was not seeing the same improvements. The importance of public opinion to Graves is evidenced by the letters that R. P. Graves quotes Graves as writing to James Reeves and Lynette Roberts. In the letter to James Reeves, Graves despairs at the lack of reviews the briskly selling *Poems 1938-1945* had received: "I belong to no racket so Observer, Statesman & S. Times etc. will give me a miss probably" (109). What Graves' plea for sympathy from James Reeves underlines is Graves' own awareness of how unpopular his views had become amongst the literary establishment of the thirties. R.P. Graves, quoting Reeves' comforting response to Graves, writes:

'I think the public hasn't caught up with you yet.' He believed that they had 'said goodbye to Georgian Robert about the time you did yourself, and haven't rediscovered Robert of the 1930s. Give 'em time. I prophesy recognition about 1950 ...' (109)

The recognition came a little more quickly than Reeves had predicted. R.P. Graves writes:

... within a few weeks Robert was telling Lynette Roberts that:

... This is the first really cordial batch [of reviews] I've had since — 1916! I suppose I'm getting old and am no longer considered a rival to the younger generation. (109)

Clearly, Graves was very sensitive about his public status. But it also seems that he was not going to sacrifice his principles in an effort to win over the critic's sympathies. Herein lies an attitude which Graves found himself taking on and which is a virtual hallmark of the protagonists of his novels. On the one hand, most of them are victims; however, and typically for a hero, they, like Graves, do not take the

option for personal gain and societal favour by compromise. Generally, they prefer to be ostracised if it means remaining true to principle.

In Graves' belligerent attitude toward critical fashions is another potential reason for his peers' antagonistic relationship with him. Their aversion toward Graves might lie in his habit of forming and publicising his opinions on the value of poets. Often, his comments are unsupported by analysis and seem merely designed to create a public furore. This habit is one of the best known aspects of his public persona. Two reviewers of his early collected essays on poetry (*The Common Asphodel* and *The Crowning Privilege*) make, respectively, the following remarks on Graves' attitude to his contemporaries in reviews which otherwise praise the collections:

He dismisses, for instance, the whole achievement of the 1930s in this [Britain] country in the most summary way, as he also dismisses the achievements of English poets in the late war. Since these dismissals are not documented in any way—as they should be, by hostile examinations of representative poems—they can carry no critical weight. (*TLS*, “Jacob and the Angel”, 632)

Each age of English literature in his survey is presented as a fall from heaven, and yet it is easy to reflect that they can only have been moving from one hell to another. A reasonable man, surely, would be more impressed if Graves proved that he could see the merits of a period in one bit of writing while he could display its fatal demerits in another; on the whole, what has been

admired by a sheer generation or two is likely to have some kind of merit.

(Empson, "Eruption", 400)

Empson and the anonymous reviewer from the TLS have made important points in their observations. However, there is a consistency to Graves' remarks on poets though his position is largely ironical. On the one hand, his negative comments are targeted specifically on poets who copy the style of other poets or of poetic movements rather than establishing their own poetic principles. On the other, he asks poets to write only for the Muse. Such a contradiction is not easily resolved.

In the foreword to *The Crowning Privilege*, Graves wrote defensively in anticipation of just the sort of attack made by his reviewers:

The 'crowning privilege' of the English poet is, as I explain, in his membership of a wholly anarchic profession. No craft-school grants him diplomas; no Royal Academy grades his technical capacities; no General Council disciplines him. His responsibility must be to the Muse alone, a stern task-mistress never satisfied with any performance offered her. He will speak his mind about poetry without polite qualification (short of committing treason or obscene libel), but remains always in a minority of one, unless he breaks with poetic tradition by organizing a clique, pleiad, or movement in Continental style.

Given the contradiction between telling poets to write for the Muse and, in the same paragraph, criticising poets who take part in a movement, it is not surprising that Graves' lectures received such a cold reaction from his peers. After all, it was not exactly clear what it was that Graves was asking them to do. Eliot, in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" seems to argue in a similar strain to

Graves (though without invoking the Muse) but with a significant difference. While Eliot, like Graves, insists on originality and the debunking of the cult of the poet and of poetic cliques, he does also insist that “The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations” (*Selected*, 24). Both Eliot and Graves insist upon the importance of uniqueness; however, Eliot’s point seems to suggest that historical uniqueness of a movement or a current is more important than an individual poet’s unique form of expression. Eliot’s view seems the more correct. If there is a “current” of originality then that current presupposed that there are poets who have created it.

Graves’ seemingly hardened and contentious opinions are not merely those of a grizzled veteran of English letters though. A well-known anecdote from Graves’ *Good-Bye To All That* comes from his early days as an undergraduate at Oxford where he claims he was called to the college board at St. John’s College for his annual interview and accused by his tutors of “favouring some writers over others” (263). The anecdote which Graves presents to his readers is telling. As Miranda Seymour notes, the story is probably exaggerated; Graves, at the time he was writing *Good-Bye to All That*, was likely trying to create an image of himself as a rebellious and spirited individual in the face of mounting accusations of his traditionalism as a poet and a thinker (95). That this passage remains unaltered between the 1929 first edition and the 1957 revision of *Good-Bye To All That* seems to support Seymour’s claim. Graves must have been miffed that his views on poetry were received with such hostility. After all, he also believed, as is shown above, in change and innovation. He, too, like his critically acclaimed peers, had been chopping at the pillars of a totemic literary establishment. Yet it seems that Graves had swung his

axe wrongly, or at least had struck at the wrong bits of the hierarchy since he remained labelled as a traditionalist. Again, Graves' fate is that of many of his novel's heroes. They, like Graves, fight the establishment for what they assume is the greater good; however, in most cases, like Graves, they seem to fail at their tasks. They, like Graves, refuse to take into account the dynamics of society; they fail to adapt to change, and they usually champion unpopular causes; however, with the exception of Claudius, it rarely seems that they do so for their own good.

The wheels of the critical industry discussed at the opening of this chapter had come full-circle by the seventies. Graves, briefly, enjoyed his place at the top of the big critical wheel; however, he refused to adapt his views with the changes the industry had engineered. Not to press the point too emphatically here, it is perhaps not surprising that Graves' *Argonauts*, as well as his *Romans*, contrary to accepted histories, also enjoyed brief tenures in the limelight. Invariably though, as Graves did himself, they managed to see their opportunities squandered. New Criticism, post-structuralism, and the birth of post-modernism all passed Graves by. He actively refused to accept or acknowledge their existence, and critics, his. His name and work had had a stigma attached to it which neither side particularly cared to have removed. As a result, he began his descent from favour once again and now lies well outside what is considered to be critically fashionable.

There are some consistencies as well as inconsistencies amongst Graves' opinions on poets and poetry. One feature which did remain intact throughout his self-fashioned directives for "proper" poetry is a disdain for the loss of, or an ignorance towards, what he described as "the language of true poetry—'true' in the nostalgic modern sense of 'the unimprovable original, not a synthetic substitute'"

(*White Goddess*, 10). Patrick J. Keane identifies the importance of the “true language of poetry” to Robert Graves’ works when he writes:

[Poetry] written under the influence of Laura Riding sought ... a truth attainable only through poetry. ‘A poem,’ as the arrogant but incorruptible Riding declared ... ‘is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other word besides poetry is adequate except truth’. (Keane, 34)

Graves always remained true to this concept though Riding later renounced her opinions. However, the deductive approach to understanding literature that he believed in, as well as his belief that one could always uncover the meaning of something if it was truly written, also created problems with modernist artists.

Monroe K. Spears, in his 1965 article written for *The Sewanee Review*, “The Latest Graves: Poet and Private Eye”, identifies what he considers to be the three essential disagreements that Graves has with modernism. The first is described by Spears as a “xenophobic prejudice” against the “Franco-American” roots of the movement (661) while the second is a “traditionalist” complaint that “Modernism is based on a confusion of the arts and that it doesn’t make sense” (661). But it is Spears’ belief that Graves’ most fundamental objection to the modernist method lies in his third criticism. This point corresponds with the observation made by Keane that is cited above:

... modernist poetry is in motive “critical, rather than creative,” and is thus a form of Apollonian poetry, which is always “composed in the forepart of the mind,” on a preconceived plan, and based on a “close knowledge of rhetoric, prosody, classical example, and contemporary fashion.” (Spears, 661-2)

In his third issue with the modernists, Graves exposes one of his inconsistencies.

Graves, as Alan Bold and Randall Jarrell have demonstrated, is “technically impeccable” (*Southern*, 852). His attention to prosodic detail is demonstrably excellent. Furthermore, Graves seems better aware of “classical examples” than most. In fact, his poetic method and subject matter is hinged on a strong knowledge of the classics (both Greek and Latin). Yet, he condemns the modernists for the very same aspects of verse that he himself considers central to his own poetry. The question which must be asked is, why?

The answer, in part, lies in Graves’ belief that rhetoric and especially attention to poetical “fashions” relegates a poem to the status of the “vulgar” (*Collected Writings*, 354). What Graves means by vulgar is what he claims Ruskin defined as the “‘deadness of heart and body’ ... [that] I should call ‘banal’” (354). The “newness” of the modernists’ poetry, characterised by the work of poets such as Pound, soon lost whatever respect Graves once may have held for it. The modernists, Graves came to find, were producing “synthetic substitutes” for the “true” language of poetry. That his “truths” were also based on preconceived notions did not seem to bother Graves in the least. He felt his task was to renounce those who did not follow his school. Newness in and for itself was not enough for Graves. One’s poetical efforts needed to be new but, as he discovered later, also needed to heed the Goddess’ calling.

C. Day Lewis, in his Clark Lecture series, after invoking Coleridge’s call for “newness” in verse, turns to the Imagist T.E. Hulme for an explanation of why a poet might want new images and metaphors to replace the old:

The poet's task, said Hulme, is 'to see things as they really are'; and he must train himself for 'the concentrated state of mind, the grip over oneself which is necessary in the actual expression of what one sees'. Poetry 'chooses fresh epithets and fresh metaphors, not so much because they are new ... but because the old cease to convey a physical thing and become abstract counters'. (*Poetic*, 24)

Graves would probably have agreed with Lewis' use of Hulme in this context. With time and abuse at the hands of inept poets, images might indeed become nothing more than abstract counters: the "vesper winds" and "silver seas" of his re-written cummings poem, for example; however, Hulme and Pound, in Graves' opinion, put far too much emphasis on the function of the image as a poetical device in itself:

With T.E. Hulme and others he [Pound] issued the *Imagiste* manifesto, which offered a hard, precise image as the *summum bonum* of poetry; but Imagism never caught on here. It seemed both precious and metrically undisciplined, and (worse) could not be harnessed to the war effort of a nation in arms.

(*Collected Writings*, 228)

Graves obviously felt that a poet had a greater responsibility to his audience than that allowed by the Imagists, one influential sub-group of the modernist movement, were willing to give.

While Graves' view of the poet's responsibility is perhaps overly concerned with duty to the Goddess, an intensely private issue, he also believed that the poet held a public responsibility. Importantly, Graves' view differs from the way in which a "traditional" Victorian like Tennyson viewed his public duty. In his public capacity, Tennyson seemed to feel obliged to write such jingoistic verses as

“Riflemen, Form!” as a patriotic gesture to gain support for England’s international crisis. For Graves, such poetry amounted to nothing more than a form of didactic prose-poetry that he saw as overtly Apollonian and not worthy of the status of “true poetry”.

Graves was not entirely consistent with his views on a poet’s public responsibility, though. On the one hand, poets are derided by Graves for participating in politics:

From 1914 to the end of 1915 the idealism of the Government poster ‘Your King and Country Need You’, the love of battle voiced by a professional soldier like Julian Grenfell, the spirit of sacrifice as voiced by the patriotic Rupert Brooke, were necessary for the public inspiration of a militarily unorganised power engaged in a death-struggle with a highly organised one ... when ‘Your King and Country Need You’ could be a trench joke for pulling corpses out of slump-pits by their boots, then sentiment changed... (*Collected Writings*, 16)

Apollonian poetry of the kind derided by Graves is a poetry, according to him, of “Artificial extravagance of conceits” (16). On the other hand, poets, as Graves characterises them in his novels, do, or should, hold respectable public positions (at the very least) and in some instances, they hold positions of absolute authority. In Graves’ *King Jesus*, for example, Jesus holds amongst his many titles, that of poet; Orpheus, in Graves’ *Hercules*, *My Shipmate* is an indispensable member of the Argonaut’s crew; the failure of a society to make proper use of their poets in *Seven Days in New Crete* leads to a collapse of their utopian environment; and, in a moment represented in great detail and with great affection by Graves in his biography of T.E.

Lawrence, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, the reader learns that Arabic armies have their travelling pace set by poets and musicians (138).

In all these works, the poet-figures have clearly defined public duties that they are expected by Graves to fulfil. Clearly, he considered poetic responsibility to be a serious affair and not to be taken lightly or as anything that might be construed as an authoritative Apollonian directive for logic and reason. Rather than being Apollonian, as will be argued in this study, the public-poets whom Graves chose to write about are all true to the sort of inspiration that produces poetry which "... you can re-read ... with excitement three years after the critics tell you it's a masterpiece" (*Collected Writings*, 244-5). In other words, poetry that is written to a "true" poetic language.

Perhaps the basis of what is meant by truth led to Graves' disagreements with his peers on the duties of a poet. Graves had a conception of what comprises a public and private poet that was not entirely harmonious with that of some of his contemporaries. In an early section of *The Struggle of the Modern*, Stephen Spender quotes Graves' response to a questionnaire conducted in a 1962 edition of *The London Magazine* where Graves makes the claim that for readers of poetry, "personal issues are what interest people, not newspaper issues" (8). Graves' distinction between personal issues and newspaper issues caused Spender some concern; however, in his essay, "The Poet and His Public", Graves makes his position somewhat more clear:

We must distinguish those [poems] written to convey a careful eye to the public files from those written in private emotion. ... a poem is seldom so personal that a small group of the poet's contemporaries cannot understand it;

and if it has been written with the appropriate care—by which I mean that the problem troubling him is stated as truly economically and detachedly as possible they are likely to admire the result. The poem might even supply the answer to a pressing problem of their own, because the poet is a human being, and so are they. (*Collected Writings*, 242)

What Graves is trying to make clear is his view that a political issue, for example, is not a valid source as a subject for the writing of good poetry. However, he also stresses that it is possible, since each poet is a human being, for a poet's work, though written on a personal subject, to have a broader appeal to greater human issues.

In this sense, Graves has claimed to have discarded politically and media centred issues (such as the war) from his oeuvre. Tellingly, *Poems 1938-1945*, has no poems that address the war directly. Such an absence is difficult to explain for a combatant of the Great War. Surely, as an event in itself, the Second World War must have some struck some deeply personal nerves. However, a close reading of some of the poems, with the reader bearing these few biographical details of Graves in mind, can evoke some rather poignant anti-war imagery. A reader with a general knowledge of Graves' war experiences can begin to recognise that the poems are based upon personal, though highly idiosyncratic, subjects, and that they also contain broader social issues within them. In this way, Graves escapes the criticism he levelled against the modernist focus on subjective interpretation. He feels things individually but avoids the subject's trivialisation by suggesting more profound conclusions from its substance.

The distinction between the trivial and the profound is important to note, and through an examination of some of the poems in the volume, such as the "The Shot",

a revelation of the system of poetic logic through which Graves means to provide a constructive and profound insight for his reader on both a private and a public level can be observed.

The Shot

The curious heart plays with its fears:
 To hurl a shot through the ship's planks,
 Being assured that the green angry flood
 Is charmed and dares not dance into the hold—
 Nor first to sweep a lingering glance around
 For land or shoal or cask adrift.
 'So miracles are done; but madmen drown.'

O weary luxury of hypothesis—
 For human nature, honest human nature
 (Which the fear-pampered heart denies)
 Knows its own miracle: not to go mad.
 Will pitch the shot in fancy, hint the fact,
 Will bore perhaps a meagre auger hole
 But stanch the spurting with a tarred rag,
 And will not drown, nor even ride the cask.

A pregnant expectation of another Robert Graves war poem is playfully introduced by the poem's title. The expectation is apparently relieved in the second line where the reader learns that "the shot" is not a reference to Graves' Great War experiences, but rather, is a fictional shot which is being hurled through a "ship's

planks". The destructive nature of the shot is shocking when it is revealed through the syntax and structure of the line that it is the owner of something as trivial as a "curious heart" who is hurling the shot. It is important to note that the shot is hurled "through *the* ship's planks" and not, "*a* ship's planks". The stress which the definite article places on the ship as an immediate object, rather than as an indefinite article might have implied, a hypothetical one, leads to profound causal implications. When one reflects that it is the bearer of the playful heart who is hurling a shot through the planks of the very ship on which he is a passenger, the poem's discrete moral lesson begins to become clear.

From the perspective of Graves' poetics, it is an unequivocal grammatical tool, the colon, which punctuates the first line and sets up the second as an express example of how exactly it is that the curious heart is proposing to play with its fears. The suicidal overtone which such a "playful" proposition implies bears heavily on the developing psychological make-up of the narrator. The notion that such an action could be considered by the speaker draws the reader's attention to the dramatic potential of the action and to the impending fate of its perpetrator.

Though the suicidal proposition is reported from the third-person narrative perspective, thereby giving a fictional context to the consideration, there is an implied first-person presence in the statement (a sort-of masked self-reflexivity so effectively used by accepted masters of the dramatic monologue such as Robert Browning). The effect created for the reader by the implication is that the poem's "fiction" is, at the very least, mentally experienced by the narrator. This overtone gives the poem its sobering moral slant which Graves subsequently explores.

In the third and fourth lines, the reader learns that the shot is hurled because the “curious heart” is “... assured that the green angry flood / Is charmed and dares not dance into the hold.” Through this assurance, Graves expands the apparent purpose of the composition. Before hurling the imaginative shot, the “curious heart” does not first “... sweep a lingering glance around / For land or shoal or cask adrift” (a graceful allusion to the aphoristic colloquialism: “look before you leap”). The implication of the speaker’s passivity is that the heart’s “fear” is as charmed as the hull of the ship: neither is in real danger from “the shot”; hence, the flippancy with which it can be hurled. It seems, from the poem’s commentary, that Graves considered such a nonchalant attitude morally reprehensible. However, the commentary does not come from a “traditional” logician’s tool box where one might find premises and antecedents with which to build an argument, but rather from “magical”, poetic, devices such as tone which contribute to a syllogism which is only revealed when the argument is perceived as a whole.

Graves develops the poetical argument with the concluding line of the first stanza, “So miracles are done; but madmen drown”. This line functions as a segue to the haunting rejoinder of the first line of the second stanza: “O weary luxury of hypothesis”. The hypothesis’ “luxury” is that the shot is merely an imaginative one. The weariness is caused because:

... human nature, honest human nature
 (Which the fear-pampered heart denies)
 Knows its own miracle: not to go mad.

The miracle is two-fold. First, it is not-mad human nature which invents the shot and imagines that the “green angry flood” will remain, magically, outside the hull after it

has been hurled. Secondly, it seems the narrator is puzzled by the ability of the human mind to remain sane while producing such wild fantasies; yet, the mind does, and the mind's security is what enables the "... weary luxury of hypothesis".

Naturally though, the hypothesis is wearying because it is purely a luxury. As such, it can be played again and again in various guises and forms. However, it will never be truly experienced. The implication here is the danger of such speculation, of such violent mental rhetoric. If danger were truly experienced, hypothetical shots would not be fired. If hypothetical shots were not fired, then the danger of an experiment with a real shot would not be as likely. Similarly, if political rhetoric, wearily hypothesised, were spared, then perhaps the "shot heard around the world" would not have been fired and his war would not have been fought. Clearly, this is a public warning, felt personally, and expressed with all the features of poetic illogic soundly in tact.

Another poem from the *1938-1945* collection serves well as an example of a poem which has also been overlooked by critics from this perspective, presumably because it fails to satisfy categories manufactured by Graves' critical and academic communities. However, as with "The Shot", this is a work which fits neatly among any variety of frames within which Graves' poetry might be read. A reading which is informed by even the most cursory of details from Graves' literary, scholarly and biographical life has a tremendous effect on the levels of meaning which might be gained from it.

The short poem can be quoted here in full:

The Beach

Louder than gulls the little children scream

Whom fathers haul into the jovial foam;
 But others fearlessly rush in, breast high,
 Laughing the salty water from their mouths—
 Heroes of the nursery.

The horny boatman, who has seen whales
 And flying fishes, who has sailed as far
 As Demerara and the Ivory Coast,
 Will warn them, when they crowd to hear his tales,
 That every ocean smells alike of tar.

“The Beach” is a poem which is very evocative. The strengths of its images are amplified by the decisive logical structure upon which the meanings of the poem are hinged. The poem consists of two stanzas of five lines each. Though the lines are in free-verse and might even be considered prosaic, their balance is maintained meticulously by their dependence on one another for cogency. In the first stanza, the second line gives meaning to the first; the third and fourth counterpoint the first two; while the fifth and final line comments on the stanza’s entirety. Following this pattern then, it is logical that the second and concluding stanza operates as a unit which comments on the entire work.

The prosodic elements of the poem act in concord with their prosaic aspects in order to amplify and provide focus for meaning. For example, Graves uses periodic sentences in the poem to create a dramatic effect—an effect which is perceived by the reader through the passivity with which the imagery reaches his or her eyes. This, coupled with the “periodic” support of the lines which follow, each enlightening their

predecessor, has a peculiar effect on the poem's intelligibility and the reader's relationship with its meanings.

The opening line of the poem is a good example of Graves' blending of the rhetorical tools of both poetry and prose: "Louder than gulls the little children scream". The subject and the object of the sentence have been inverted, while the verb, which in natural speech would occur in the middle of the statement, is placed at the end. This artificiality creates the effect of a punctuated exclamation without the need for the punctuation point. Furthermore, Graves has craftily created the effect of a transparent communication of the speaker's consciousness that is logically, but not stylistically, similar to the stream-of-consciousness technique of the contemporaries whom he so often derided. The meaning of the line, by this method, becomes sprung where meaning seems to evolve naturally while the words simply run on until a point is finally made.

The observation "Louder than gulls" seems an almost passive and inconsequential thought. But the observation also marks the beginning of a process which the reader can witness developing into a concrete concept by the speaker. "The little children" are the subject of this developing concept which is then connected with the first by the verb, "scream". In this way, Graves has both the reader and the speaker arrive at the concretised conclusion simultaneously. Neither, in other words, is "privileged" with "knowing" what is about to be spoken. The speaker is not preaching to his listener. The listener is hearing the speaker's thoughts and is left to make judgement upon them.

The resulting ambiguities on the levels of the poem's truthfulness and authority allow Graves to toy with levels of irony and his reader's ability to perceive

them. Graves is quite clearly demonstrating an awareness of the different levels of narrative presence and reader experience through this method. On the one hand, we have the real author, Graves, whom “real” readers can identify as the figure beneath the poem. But more importantly, Graves is addressing the relationship between the implied author and his “ideal” reader. Both have a place in this text as ironical figures against whom the “real” poem is screened. In this manner, Graves is drawing his “real” reader actively into the text as a critic of the poem’s ironical implied author and “ideal” reader.

Similarly, the title of the poem, “The Beach”, is playfully deceptive in that it is not at all suggestive of the seriousness the poem’s tone. The opening line, which has already been examined, beckons the reader to recall their own memories of children’s “shouts” that they may have heard while lying on a beach or sitting in a park and invites the reader to juxtapose his or her own experiences with those of the poet. Such a juxtaposition thereby associates the poet’s “emotional crisis” which follows this trivial image with the reader’s own emotional experience by linking it through a shared moment. It is not difficult to imagine one’s self hearing the “screams” of children on a beach—perhaps even seeing the literal image of the first line being played out before him or her—and then transcribing that image in the form of a metaphor for a retrospection. In fact, Graves has begun this poem, structurally, in a similar manner to the method of an anecdotal reminiscence. In other words, we, as the readers, are made to expect that we are about to hear a story.

At this early stage of the poem, there is no reason to read the poem as anything more serious than a reflection. However, Graves begins to alter the mood of the poem—a change which he effects with the image of the second line. The

“screaming children”, the reader discovers through the speaker’s own developing connections, are screaming because they are being “hailed” into the sea. They are not participating in children’s games; rather, they are being forced into the water against their wills. This action conjures images of the proverbial “sink or swim” adage. However, as the speaker takes the sequence of connections further, he learns that what he originally observed as being farcical is, in fact, a metaphor for a much uglier aspect of human history. With the closing line of the stanza, “Heroes of the nursery”, Graves drops his biographical baggage squarely onto the shoulders of his reader. The screaming children are suddenly twinned with Graves’ own “rite-of-passage” into the “adult” world as a hero of a much crueller nursery in the trenches of the Western Front.

Furthermore, the line is a clear allusion to the title of one of Graves’ first published poems, “The Poet in the Nursery”. The last stanza of that poem echoes the theme of the second stanza of “The Beach” where words are spoken from the perspective of supposed experience but lacking the essential ingredient of understanding and knowledge (in this case the knowledge is quite clearly supposed to be read as carnal) to provide them with meaning:

I took the book to bed with me and gloated,
 Learning the lines that seemed to sound most grand;
 So soon the lively emerald green was coated
 With intimate dark stains from my hot hand,
 While round the nursery for long months there floated
 Wonderful words no one could understand. (*Complete*, 3)

Additionally, the masturbatory images evoked by the third and fourth lines seem to be alluded to by the overriding criticism in “The Beach” that society presses its youth to maturity before they are experienced enough to manage the responsibility. The sexual overtones are clear and seem to suggest that the theme of poetry and devotion to the Muse (nearly always a sexual cycle culminating in the frustrated poet writing verses to his Muse attempting, once again, to win the right to be with her) is present in, arguably, Graves’ earliest poem.

Since “The Beach” has already drawn its reader into a personal relationship with the poet’s recollections and the connections he makes to his own past, the reader is forced to re-examine the earlier lines through Graves’ jaded and experienced eyes, much the same sort of rhetorical shift that takes place in *Good-Bye To All That*. While the reader can imagine the opening image of the poem in his or her own terms, it is as a result of the powerful closing image and the biographical associations that are contained within it that we must turn back on the remainder of the verse.

Graves despised heroism for the mere sake of glory. He voices this opinion quite clearly throughout *Good-Bye To All That*. Keeping in mind Graves’ experiences and opinions of war, we can begin to comprehend the bitterness which he is expressing when he wrote the line, “Heroes of the nursery.” However, the bitterness articulated through the line—the bitterness which flavours the tone of the entire stanza—is not derived purely from biographical sources. The text leads the reader to such a conclusion on its own; the cadence of the entire stanza can be seen to gradually slow until it grinds to halt with the half-metered final line... the bitterness literally choking the speaker’s voice to a halt. That this poem was written around the same time that Graves learned of his son’s death while serving with the Royal Welch

Fusiliers in the war against Japan adds an extra-textual poignancy to its message. As Miranda Seymour notes in her biography of Graves,

Graves' own sense of loss, and of lost opportunities, was intense. This was uppermost in his mind when he wrote to Basil Liddell Hart in the spring of 1944 about 'a deeply rooted religious habit of sacrificing one's son'.

Indirectly he was acknowledging a responsibility. It was he who had encouraged David to go to war, who had helped him to get into his own regiment and allowed himself the fantasy that he, through his son, was participating in the action (305).

In the poem, the juxtaposition of the image of a patriarchal induction to "manhood" and the innocence of a summer's day at the beach is further enforced when it is read through the image of the third and fourth lines of the poem. Here, the children who were "hauled" into the sea are seen in contrast with children who are depicted charging into the water "fearlessly". It is these children who are the heroes and in Graves' "nursery" were the first to become statistics of the War's slaughter. Graves, in the sentiment expressed by these lines, may well have been responding to the newspaper reports on David's death which described his heroic actions:

The company ahead was held up by heavy automatic mortar fire and grenades. Carrying on with a sergeant and a Bren gunner he bombed his way to the first position, where the sergeant and Bren gunner were put out of action.

Undeterred he returned with a new load of grenades, and, crossing the open ground swept by heavy enemy fire, attacked single-handed a new strongpoint which the Japanese were defending with grenades. He charged

and captured the post alone, and was continuing to advance when he was shot
[in the head]. (Seymour Smith, 367)

Again, in this first stanza, and especially in its closing lines, there is no mistaking the tone or the message which Graves is putting forth; however, blended with biographical details such as David's death, and Graves' own war-time experiences, the poem becomes even more powerful.

Graves introduces "the horny boatman" in the second stanza as an apparent iconoclast of the institutions which the first stanza is exposing; namely, the patriarchal oligarchy which can send young men to die in muddy trenches giving as little consideration for the "ultimate price" the young men might be asked to pay as they do to the "innocent" activity of manfully "hauling" children into the sea. In both scenarios, the motivation for influencing the children's fates is an unquestioning loyalty to an institutional tradition that says that these are things "which must be done."

"Horny", in this case, is primarily a reference to the boatman's physical condition as opposed to his sexual state. He is "horny" because he is weathered from the experience of sailing as far as "Demerara and the Ivory Coast". His warning that "every ocean smells alike of tar" is impotent. Ships, before steel-hulled vessels, were sealed with tar; however, the "horny boatman" foolishly believes he smells tar in every ocean. The irony of such an ignorant man passing a "warning" on to the "crowd" is made even more profound by the passivity with which the audience on the beach is receiving it.

The contrast between the audience's reception of the boatman's speech and the activity with which Graves forces his readers to participate in the poem is striking

and makes a profound statement in its own right. The reader is the only presence in the poem who is “supposed” to recognise all the levels of irony. The poet, temporarily accepting Graves’ concept of poetical inspiration coming while in a tranced state, is, by association together with the speaker, not “supposed” to recognise the irony in the words. Indeed, in this poem, the “unstated connotations” are discovered by an active and attendant reader; however, the biographical associations make it clear that this poem is a form of self-chastisement for Graves at his guilt in having encouraged his son to be another victim of yet another war.

The imagery of the first stanza makes a clear biographical association between Graves and the speaker of the poem. This association is then juxtaposed with the ironical conclusions of the second stanza to provide the reader with a sorrowful self-examination of the poet. Graves can be seen to be self-depreciatingly associating himself with the “horny boatman”. The term “horny”, in this case, takes on a sexual charge when it is read along side Graves’ earlier poem, “The Poet in the Nursery”. The “dark stains” of that poem and the overwhelming image of the sexual release discovered by the poet in the company of verse suggests a singular attachment to the subject. In other words, just as the boatman smells tar everywhere he travels, the poet of the nursery feels his “intimate dark stains”. His experience, just as the boatman’s, is tainted.

Graves’ “boat” for the voyage to adulthood was the War. Just as the boatman believes that “every ocean smells alike of tar,” so too can Graves only see young boys as “Heroes of the nursery”, or as unwilling victims of a cruel rite. In a sense, Graves’ audience, his “reader[s] over [his] shoulder”, are paralleled with the boatman’s audience who hear his ironic story with a frightening literalness; both should realise

how malleable they are. Most significantly, Graves' "real" audience is made to feel they have shared an experience with the boatman's audience since they, just as the audience in the poem, have been duped into listening to the words of a man who can only see the world from one point-of-view: that of a poet raised in a nursery, masturbating with the intimacy of his own words in what must have seemed a futile activity when a war was being waged virtually at his doorstep.

As a supposedly cured neurasthenic who wrote *Good-Bye to All That* and who had published a collection of poems titled *No More Ghosts* several years prior to the printing of *Poems, 1938-1945*, Graves was evidently still plagued by the War. It appears from the tone of this poem as though Graves was rather uncertain about the "authority" of his public and private voice. If the boatman's tale is ironic, then how should we take Graves' story? The paradox of Graves as a public figure who expressed his desire to lead a private life and as a hero who was insecure with his public persona is very expressly portrayed in this poem—a depiction of Graves which has implications to a wide variety of his works and not only his poetry.

Graves' position on political versus personal poetry is best clarified by a reviewer of Graves' collection of essays, *The Common Asphodel*, when he writes: "...the politics against which he [Graves] is warning younger poets are the discarded politics of his own youth, those of democratic humanism" (*TLS*, "Jacob", 632). If for Graves, democratic humanism was a discarded issue then for Spender, who was a bourgeois liberal socialist, the very notion of abandoning principles of "democratic humanism" must have seemed appalling. Samuel Hynes, in *The Auden Generation*, while writing about Spender's early poetical career makes the following observation:

External events, if they are dire enough—a war, or the collapse of society—challenge the value of private acts, and put the personal life to the test. For a young man ... such a crisis, coming at a time when he was trying to define himself and his place in the world, must have been profoundly disorienting and disturbing.

When the young man is a poet, and the private act that he values is the writing of a poem, then a crisis in society becomes a literary problem. Is the role of a poet a defensible one in such a time? And if it is, what sort of poem should he write? (67)

Hynes' leading questions are clearly sympathetic with Spender's. Spender's concern with Graves' comment arises because Spender felt that a "newspaper" issue could not be the subject for a poem unless the poet had felt the issue affecting him personally (*Struggle*, 8) and that, as a result, Graves' point is mute: there is no such thing as a purely "newspaper" issue if a poet has troubled to write a poem about it.

Given the benefit of time, and in retrospect, it seems as though Graves and Spender had argued themselves into agreement though they never seemed to recognise the common ground between them on this issue. Tennyson, for example, may indeed have felt strongly about the impending Crimean conflict when he wrote "Riflemen, Form!"; Tennyson's fears about the potential crisis may have been such that a very "newspaper" issue had in fact struck him personally and inspired the verse. While this notion might be successfully defended, the parade-ground language and bland imagery of the poem seem to confirm its status as a propagandist advertisement rather than something which either Hynes, Graves or Spender would consider an inspired poem. The Crimean crisis was not written about as if it truly were a "literary

problem” nor is Tennyson’s “call to arms” a defensible position for a poet; and, it is unlikely that any one of the above named critics would have considered “Rifleman, Form!” the “sort of poem to write”.

It was not until the publication of *The White Goddess* in 1948 that Graves’ views on the proper subjects for poetry, the “truth” about poetry, the language of poetry, and the function of myth in both the language and meaning of poetry was brought to the general public’s attention. Nor was it until this time that the notions surrounding that theory made sense for Graves in an explicable way. Nevertheless, the fervour with which he grasped with theory of the Goddess was infectious, and it began to dominate all of his writing in an overt manner, rather than the covert form in which the theories had appeared in his previous writings.

In the foreword to *The White Goddess*, Graves offers an apology for why he felt bound to undertake the monolithic task of creating a theory that would explain the truth of all true poetry:

I have not cared to leave out any step in the laborious argument, if only because readers of my recent historical novels have grown a little suspicious of unorthodox conclusions for which the authorities are not always quoted. Perhaps they will now be satisfied, for example, that the mystical Bull-calf formula and the two Tree-alphabets which I introduced into *King Jesus* are not ‘wanton figments’ of my imagination but logically deduced from reputable ancient documents. (9)

While Graves’ reference to his historical novels in this introduction to *The White Goddess* will be essential to later discussion, for the time being, it is important to

recognise that this work tells us most clearly what Graves believed the historical role of the poet was supposed to have been.

In chapter twenty-two of *The White Goddess* Graves summarises the historical fall of matriarchal rule (a recurring theme throughout the work):

The revolutionary institution of fatherhood, imported into Europe from the East, brought with it the institution of individual marriage. Hitherto there had been only group marriages of all female members of a particular totem society with all members of another; every child's maternity was certain, but its paternity debatable and irrelevant. Once this revolution had occurred, the social status of woman altered: man took over many of the sacred practices from which his sex had debarred him, and finally declared himself head of the household, though much property still passed from mother to daughter. (388-9)

Graves' heroes and poets all suffer because they seem acutely aware of the unnaturalness of their social position. Many of the male rulers of Graves' novels seem content, even eager, to allow women to rule their "kingdoms" while they maintain a figurative position as the head of state.

Graves continues his explication of the historical demise of Goddess worshipping and matriarchal society by describing two essential cultural paradigm shifts which occurred as a result of a patriarchal assumption of roles hitherto traditionally held by women. The first stage is pre-Christian and is responsible for the shift in the focus of myths from goddesses to gods:

... the Olympian stage necessitated a change in mythology. It was not enough to introduce the concept of fatherhood into the ordinary myth ... A new child

was needed who should supersede both the Star-son and the Serpent. He was celebrated by poets as the Thunder-child, or the Axe-child, or the Hammer-child. ... Then he became the Father-god, or Thunder-god, married his mother and begot his divine sons and daughters on her. ... Among these sons was a God of poetry, music, the arts and the sciences: he was eventually recognised as the Sun-god and acted in many countries as active regent for his senescent father, the Thunder-god. In some cases he even displaced him. The Greeks and Romans had reached this religious stage by the time that Christianity began. (389)

According to Graves, this final stage was the death-knell for Goddess worship because of its absolute commitment to patriarchy. It was the period of "... later Judaism, Judaic Christianity, Mohammedanism and Protestant Christianity" (389).

Graves goes on to write:

This stage is unfavourable to poetry. Hymns addressed to the Thunder-god, however lavishly they may gild him in sun-god style—even Skelton's magnificent *Hymn to God the Father*—fail as poems, because to credit him with illimitable and unrestrained power denies the poet's inalienable allegiance to the Muse; and because the Thunder-god has been a jurist, logician, declamator and prose-stylist, he has never been a poet or had the least understanding of true poems since he escaped from his Mother's tutelage. (389-90)

Naturally, Graves has a great deal of mythological evidence with which to back up this point of view. Radical though it may seem, Graves' opinion was that this strain

of myth had been suppressed by the church, state and false poets who propagated *their* revisionist writings.

As will be discussed in chapter seven, Graves' representation of Jesus in *King Jesus* seeks to establish how exactly it was that Jesus, a very political figure, came to eradicate Goddess worship from society and what the scriptural and political motivations for his actions might have been. Jesus, as will be argued, becomes an archetypal figure for Graves—a figure through whom Graves can expose the political leanings of biblical scholars and mythographers over the last 2000 years and show that, like Jesus, these scholar-poets are grand failures.

In chapter twenty-six, the original conclusion to *The White Goddess* prior to the epilogue that was appended in 1960, Graves condemns the contemporary (in 1948) political systems and leaders whom he sees as having forcibly denied the possibility for a return of the Goddess by implementing patriarchal systems that “worshipped” engineering, manufacturing and labour in a form nearly as sacred as the holy trinity. Hitler's fascism, for example, as well as the totalitarian nature of Stalinist communism are seen to suppress religions for unjust reasons. The reasons, according to Graves, that Hitler and others had used such extreme measures for suppressing their religious opponents was because they had completely failed to grasp the historical significance and the basis of the foundations of religious belief, and brute force was the only means by which they could accomplish their tasks. According to Graves, Hitler's attitude toward those of the Jewish faith, for example, had been justified absurdly:

Hitler's remark, ... referred to the alleged economic oppression of Europe by the Jews. He was being unfair: under Christianity the Jews had for centuries

been forbidden to hold land or become members of ordinary craft-guilds, and obliged to live on their wits (474).

Accordingly, Graves is suggesting that the German people, and so many others for that matter, accepted Hitler's policies only as a result of their utter ignorance of historical realities. Graves was determined to edify his readers by drawing their attention to an alternative and more natural belief system that had been suppressed for hundreds of years by a patriarchal system of government and patrilinear family hierarchies. Implicitly, through his novels and other writings, one can detect the utopia that Graves had offered, and in others, such as *Seven Days in New Crete*, one can read his worry that society might misinterpret his directives and twist the notion of a life dedicated to the Goddess into something cruel and lacking in magical illogic.

Further on the subject of misapprehended religious traditions, Graves also chastises Sir James Frazer for not realising, while writing and researching *The Golden Bough*, that it was not “the selfish and immoral doctrine of Oriental religions which inculcated the communion of the soul with God'...” (474) but (and he includes Hitler's misguided punishment of the Jews in his summary):

... that the early Gentile Christians borrowed from the Hebrew prophets the two religious concepts, hitherto unknown in the West, which have become the prime causes of our unrest: that of a patriarchal God, who refuses to have any truck with Goddesses and claims to be self-sufficient and all-wise; and that of a theocratic society, disdainful of the pomps and glories of the world, in which everyone who rightly performs his civic duties is a 'son of God' and entitled to salvation, whatever his rank or fortune, by virtue of direct communion with the Father. (475)

Clearly, Graves feels that Christo-Hebraic religions are to be blamed for replacing a goddess-worshipping system with a system which demanded faith for a patriarch—worse yet, that in Stalinist Russia and Hitler’s Germany the god-head patriarch was a living member of society who inculcated society with his own personal mythology. Further, this mythology did not have the essential historical and theological foundations upon which other religio-political figures, like Jesus, built their successes. In this way, Hitlerism and Stalinism were fated to wither from the moment of their ill-conception; after all, their systems were based on “sheer newness” and lacked the necessary historical heritage which could guarantee that their movements were not simply faddish.

Clearly, Graves’ opinions on poetry, while mostly limited to the subject of poetry, were also political. Poetry, as an aspect of culture, reflects the mechanisms of society which produce creative impulses. Pound’s right-wing politics and Eliot’s conservative Christian leanings can only be seen from a Gravesian perspective as symptomatic of the sickness of society. However, Graves was not a statesman and, therefore, did not address these issues as a statesman. Graves rejoinder to his peers’ politics was the supposedly “unpolitical” theory of an illogical matriarchal governess and muse.

His fiction, on the other hand, allowed him to address contemporary affairs from a more direct perspective. Drawing upon the Victorian tradition of the historical novel, Graves took contemporary issues and recast them in a historical past. His success is in his indirectness. To understand that, though, his methods for restoring history must be understood. That so many of his critics have failed to comprehend the relevance of his deductive methodology for uncovering lost meanings of myth of

poetry has much to do with why his novels have been accepted as the “pot boilers” which he tried to pass them off as. The next chapter will demonstrate through an analysis of his short fiction how he deployed his poetic methods for the writing of historical fiction.

Chapter Three

A Study of Narrative Structure in Graves' Short Fiction

In the previous chapter, the most distinctive differences between Robert Graves' prose-fictional writing of the twenties, thirties, and forties and that of his modernist contemporaries was demonstrated to be stylistic. This contrast, in itself, is not dramatic nor particularly unique. Quite obviously, many writers of the time, Waugh and Powell, for example, can be considered not to be modernist yet significant to literary history nonetheless. Likewise, Graves' historical fiction and short stories are, stylistically, more similar to the writings of the Victorian age than to that of the modernist movement; however, as will be argued here, do demonstrate modernism's influence.

Graves' modernist contemporaries are known for their innovative prose techniques—techniques that break from nineteenth century novelistic conventions and which establish new modes of expression appropriate to the rapidly changing twentieth century. On the other hand, late Victorians such as Thomas Hardy and Edwardians like Arnold Bennett are better known for the substance rather than the manner of their writing. Graves is usually regarded, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, as comprising a part of a continuation of a tradition of prose writing considered particularly English and conservative. As with Hardy and

Bennett, Graves' novels and short fiction are usually praised for their story, attention to period detail and plainness of style rather than for their stylistic innovations.

In contrast, modernists such as Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce are praised as often for *how* they write as they are for *what* they write. These quintessentially modernist writers at various times in their careers attempted to demonstrate the historical uniqueness and their personal awareness of their relationship to history. Joyce, as has been discussed earlier, made much use of myth and history in his writings. However, in Joyce's novels, both action and events and *how* action and events are described, are equally integral to his project and, in large part, the object of his writing. Novels such as Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Stein's *Brewsie and Willie*, as other examples, explore the psychological effects of modernity, in post-war years, on combatants and non-combatants alike. In subject, the concerns of their writings—especially their interests in psychology—are not so very different from the more traditional work of Graves, Sassoon and Blunden.

However, the stylistic uniqueness of Woolf and Stein's writings is one feature of their works that defines their efforts as modernist and as clearly distinct from that of their more conventional contemporaries. Indeed, their work *is* different from that of their predecessors, but on more than a merely stylistic level. In the case of Woolf and Stein, time and their protagonist's reception of it, for just one example, is represented as fragmentary and disruptive through a stream-of-consciousness narrative. The recognition that the individual sees the world differently from his or her counterparts transcends the Romantic fascination of the egotistical sublime and asserts, paradoxically, a profound uncertainty of the objective truth of the world at hand.

The resultant trauma suffered by the narrators and characters in the novels of this type evokes a sensation that is reminiscent of the psychoanalytic session which so fascinated artists and writers in the early part of the twentieth century. The effect of a narrative disrupted by a self-conscious stream-of-consciousness brings to the reader an experience as disquieting as that suffered by the character whose consciousness is being exposed. The same effect can be achieved through setting, mood or atmosphere in more traditional narratives; however, the newness of the modernist method has the effect of defamiliarising the reader and focusing his or her attention upon the effect of the event on the narrator.

Through the latter interest, modernist writers were clearly expressing their overt influence of, and concern with, Freudian psychoanalysis. Freudian psychoanalytic theory, at this stage, was known in a rather diluted form. Few of these writers had investigated Freudianism much beyond its social and cultural influence. Nevertheless, Christopher Butler identifies a key feature of Modernist art which reflects the *avant-garde* preoccupation with Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In his survey of early modernism, Butler writes:

It is the idea of psychological division which underpins the technique of allusion by citation in much Modernist work. This is an innovation for the language of the arts ... In destroying univocity it makes the very medium of literature and painting (and later, music) equivocal, because the *mélange* of styles which results reflects the dominance of historical relativism and doubts about a universally acceptable 'message' for the work. (119)

Freud demonstrated that the individual is fragmented, is composed of an id, an ego, and a superego. In his writings, he described the nature of the unconscious which he

claimed was discoverable through the manifest and latent content of dreams. Dreams in themselves were considered to be fragmentary and the result of the construction of memories and desires within the subject.

The “psychological divisions” that Butler describes as underpinning the techniques of modernist artists are the fragmented substance of the material which was, in the Victorian tradition, formally considered unified and representative of historical truths and events. Such truths were recognised as being at least as temporary as the mind which Freud had charted. These “truths” were then reinscribed by modernist artists through pastiche and allusion in an effort to mimic the mind’s construction of the disturbed mass of what was formerly considered whole.

Butler is also referring to the modernist concern with history and classicism as touchstones for contemporary cultural meaning. Pound’s *Cantos*, Eliot’s *Waste Land* and David Jones’ *In Parenthesis* come to mind as three works which utilise the technique of allusion by citation. In each case, the writers demonstrate an acute awareness of the relativism of their citations—citations which are bracketed by a narratorially self-conscious subjectivity. Each allusion invoked by the narrator is a signpost left by the author that points to the condition of his narrator’s mind. In other words, they are showing that “truth” is a relative issue; however, it is an issue which only seems wholly true to the mind in which it was conceived. The very fabric of the narrative becomes dialogic—between the narrator and his or her ideal reader—whereby the speaker is purposefully and systematically trying to convince the reader of his or her sanity and the correctness of his or her opinions and drawing the reader into a complicit relationship with the narrator. The closing scene of David Jones’ *In Parenthesis* demonstrates this technique perfectly:

At the gate of the wood you try a last adjustment, but slung so, it's an
 impediment, it's of detriment to your hopes, you had best be rid of it—the
 sagging webbing and all and what's left of your two fifty—but it were wise to
 hold on to your mask.

You're clumsy in your feebleness, you implicate your tin-hat rim with the
 slack sling of it.

Let it lie for the dews to rust it, or ought you to decently cover the
 working parts.

It's dark barrel, where you leave it under the oak, reflects the solemn
 star that rises urgently from Cliff Trench.

It's a beautiful doll for us
 it's the Last Reputable Arm.

But leave it—under the oak.
 leave it for a Cook's tourist to the Devastated Areas and crawl as far as you
 can and wait for the bearers.

...

The feet of the reserves going up tread level with your fore-head; and
 no word for you; they whisper one with another;
 pass on, inward;
 these last succours:
 green Kimmerii to bear up the war.

Oeth and Annoeth's hosts they were

who in that night grew
 younger men
 younger striplings.

The geste says this and the man who was on the field ... and who wrote the
 book ... the man who does not know this has not understood anything. (186-7)

Jones leaves his reader with only one way of reading his story and that is from his speaker's perspective. The reader is made to assume the speaker's trials by becoming the third-person "you" and together with Jones, dragging him or her self away from the conflict, fearful that the armistice will not last, that the bearers will not come, that the ghosts of the "younger men" will haunt. In this way, the reading must be sympathetic toward Jones' narrator's representation of events. If it is not, then, as Jones tells us with the last line of the work, the reader will have "not understood anything".

Narratologically, theories of the dialogic nature of statements in the psychoanalytic session are absorbed and considered by Bakhtin and his Russian contemporaries and offer a fascinating way of opening texts for analysis. In his critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, Bakhtin's contemporary, Vološinov⁹, offers his perspective on the mechanisms underpinning Freud's methodology that can, to a certain degree, explain the difficulty of applying Freudian psychoanalytic approaches

⁹ Many commentators regard "Vološinov" as one of Bakhtin's pseudonyms.

However, for the purposes of clarity in this work he will be considered as a separate writer.

toward an exploration of the complexities of more traditional narrative strategies (assuming, for the moment, that traditional implies a narrative attempting to ascertain grand truths about the human condition in history).

Vološinov's analysis of Freud is based upon an exploration of the oral, discursive, nature of the psychoanalytic session. He writes: "Freud's whole psychological construct is based fundamentally on human verbal utterances; it is nothing but a special kind of interpretation of utterances" (Morris, 39). Vološinov's stress on the discursive underpinnings of psychoanalysis is obvious enough, and his conclusion that "the patient is himself supposed to provide him [Freud] information about the depths of the 'unconscious'" (39) is Freudian to the letter.

What emerges from Vološinov's critique and is central to this discussion is an emphasis on what can only be described as a form of dialogical discourse which Vološinov identifies as an indelible feature of the doctor-patient session. In discussing the Freudian conception of the content of the unconscious—as something which "... stands in opposition not to the individual conscious of the patient but, primarily, to the doctor ..." (42)—he claims that the patient's unconscious is always in the process of being related by the Freudian to the patient's past (42). In other words, the patient's awareness of the psychoanalytic process presupposes—or rather intuitively—an unspoken response from the psychoanalyst to which the patient implicitly is always in a process of responding. The doctor-patient "conversation" then, while spoken in one voice is necessarily always in a dialogical state. The effect is that a psychoanalytic session produces the same form of heteroglotic, polyphonous, narrative that Bakhtin identifies as a basis of the novel form.

However, Vološinov insists on the inadequacy of the Freudian approach because, as he claims, “anything like [an] objective remembrance of our past inner experiences is, of course, entirely out of the question” (42). As a result, according to Vološinov, the doctor-patient dialogue is founded on a false premise: the patient will remember his or her past according to what he or she believes the psychoanalyst wants to hear. This criticism is taken up by both Freud and Lacan in their discussions upon the notion of transference. Freud defines the notion of transference as follows:

They [transferences] are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic for their species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician. To put it another way: a whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, but as applying to the person of the physician at the present moment. (‘Dora’, 157-8)

Freud continues by explaining that the process of transference occurs any time a patient undergoes a psychological introspection and then concludes by stating that

Transference, which seems ordained to be the greatest obstacle to psychoanalysis, becomes its most powerful ally, if its presence can be detected each time and explained to the patient. (159)

Lacan, similarly, through his description of counter-transference offers not so much a solution to the dilemma but a proposal which puts an emphasis on the importance of the effect to the very process:

On the one hand, the being of the analyst is shown, not without courage, to be a by no means negligible factor in the result of the analysis—and even a factor

in the effects of the analysis that should, towards the end, be brought out into the open. On the other hand, it is put forward no less forcefully that no solution is possible except by an ever more thorough exploration of the mainsprings of the unconscious. (35-6)

For these reasons, Vološinov's criticism of Freud is not easily rationalised. Freud further anticipates that his theories might be undermined by the sort of logic employed by Vološinov. In the editor's introduction to Freud's lecture on "Psycho-Analysis and Legal Evidence", Strachey writes:

... even here his approval of them [association experiments and the theory of complexes] has a background of implied criticism. He [Freud] is at pains to show that the Zurich findings are in fact only special applications of underlying psycho-analytic principles. And in the penultimate paragraph he indicates the danger of drawing too hasty conclusions from the results of association tests. (100)

Strachey's observation is telling, especially in light of passages where Freud attempts to dissuade the legal profession from copying the psychoanalyst's method too closely. Tellingly, Freud draws a parallel between the task of the therapist and that of an examining magistrate:

We have to uncover the hidden psychical material; and in order to do this we have invented a number of detective devices, some of which it seems that you gentlemen of the law are about to copy from us. (108)

What is key in terms of our discussion here is Freud's emphasis on "*the* hidden material". Freud's use of the definite article in discussing "hidden materials" does confirm Vološinov's concern with the search for anything in the patient's

unconscious through the necessarily subjective subject position of the psychoanalyst (especially in relating a past to the present). In other words, it is possible that the psychoanalyst, like an examining magistrate, might be in the process of attempting to extract *the* subject that he or she wants uncovered from the memory of the patient—to prove or assert, that is, a theory or a solution for the complex suffered by the patient.

Implicitly then, Vološinov is demanding a form of psychoanalysis which the Freudian is not, as a subjective entity, according to him, equipped to deliver. A more reactive psychoanalysis, such as that developed later by the post-Lacanian psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva, designed expressly to cope with broader questions of language and discourse, would be a more suitable tool with which to unravel what Bakhtin and Vološinov found so crucial: the “concrete utterances” that reflect “the *immediate* small social event—the event of communication, of exchange of words between persons” (Morris, 44). Specifically, for Vološinov, the Freudian investigation of the consciousness of the patient through a relation of utterances to a network of memories is insufficient—is, in fact, wasteful because the psychoanalyst will have missed “... the objective roots of even the most personal and intimate reactions” (45).

Indeed, Freud does struggle for a quantifiable, scientific product from the analyst’s session with his or her patient:

In 1901 I published a work in which I demonstrated that a whole number of actions which were held to be unmotivated are on the contrary strictly determined, and to that extent I contributed towards restricting the arbitrary factor in psychology. I took as examples slight failures of memory, slips of the tongue or pen, and the mislaying of objects. I showed that when someone

makes a slip of the tongue it is not chance, nor simply difficulty in articulation or similarity in sound that is responsible, but that in every case a disturbing ideational content—a complex—can be brought to light which has altered the sense of the intended speech under the apparent form of a slip of the tongue.

(Freud, 104-5)

“Intended speech” is precisely what a Bakhtinian understanding of narrative form is not interested in. Rimmon-Kenan, in her study of narrative fiction, isolates the central concern for Bakhtin, and singular intentions are not a part of it:

According to Bakhtin ... the central tradition of the novel is constituted by texts which are not unitary in their discourse (‘monological’) but multiple, polyphonic (‘dialogic’). This polyphonic quality is achieved both by the juxtaposition of several voices in the text itself and by the text’s integration of previous discourse, be it anterior literary texts or aspects of language and culture at large. ... The co-existence of various voices in it creates intra-textual polyphony, while the preservation of the linguistic register of the speaker orients the utterance toward previous ones, thereby creating inter-textual polyphony. (115-6)

Simply speaking, intra-textual polyphony is achieved through a repetition of scenes within a text from multiple points of view.

The importance of the above discussion in relation to the developing modernist concern with psychological and psychoanalytic influences on the artistic output of a generation is important to note. Graves was very much of that generation and was not immune to its trends. From a late twentieth century perspective, some of the ideas voiced by Vološinov on psychoanalysis may seem a little naïve; however,

the intellectual and cultural mood from which they emerged must be kept in mind.

Butler's commentary on the effect of psychoanalysis upon early modernism or Rimmon-Kenan's discussion on the emergence of the dialogic in modernist narrative all seem perfectly logical now. However, while artists, like Picasso and Braque were experimenting with simultaneous multiple perspectives in cubism or when Joyce and Faulkner were testing the limits of stream-of-consciousness, issues of how the artistic mind interacted with its environment were as much a part of their experiment as the "texts" that they produced. The scope of the potential discussion on this subject is enormous; however, the points touched upon above are, as I believe, those which are essential to bear in mind whilst examining Graves' prose fiction.

Graves' novella, *The Shout*, not only offers repeated scenes from multiple points of view, but it hides the fact that it does so—just like a particularly difficult patient in a psychoanalyst's chair. This issue will be discussed at length below; however, Graves was not only acutely aware of the intricacies of psychoanalysis (he published his study *The Meaning of Dreams* in 1924) he associates them, in a series of letters to Ken Barrett, with the subject of his story. The first letter, written in 1922 anticipates the psychological themes of *The Shout* and also, in the reference to the myth of Perseus and Medusa, of paralysing magic:

About the 3 things worth talking about; you say sex, work and nature; G.B.S.

[George Bernard Shaw] says Sex, Religion and Politics—I say, Material Comfort; Love; Psychology or more accurately Social Psychology; sexual Psychology; & the Psychology of thought, the key science—

The young blokes who yelp around "Intellect Intellect, down with sentimentality etc," according to my own account are the ones who are aware

of the painful reactions of sex are trying to sublimate same into a form where it will no longer worry them. So Perseus used the mirror given him by the Goddess of Intellect to uncharm the petrifying gaze of Medusa. A magnificent allegory. ... (*Letters to Ken*, 29)

The second letter expands upon the theme of “terrifying faces” and seems to refer to a possible source for the story in Ken Barrett himself:

Those powers that you have are an old story to me. You had them very strongly when we met in Somerville. And I remember the account of the shining green face you made once to someone at the Base to give him a scare. As you are naturally a thoroughly good person those powers could come in very useful, there being no real temptation to put them to diabolic uses. (38)

The implications of this evidence could not be more clear. Graves was toying with the very theories being engaged by psychoanalytic critics. Lacan, in fact, suggests the same Perseus-Medusa metaphor when introducing his lecture on the “Function and field of speech and language” in reference to Freud’s psychoanalytic discoveries:

“Such is the fright that seizes man when he unveils the face of his power that he turns away from it even in the very act of laying its features bare. So it has been with psychoanalysis” (34). However, while invoking the newest and most popular features of psychoanalysis in his writing, Graves employed a narratological style which was radically different from those usually associated with the writing of psychoanalytically sensitive fiction.

Late Victorian writers in the realist tradition who were influenced, like Woolf and Stein, by Freudian psychoanalysis, and were concerned with demonstrating psychological traumas did so through description and suggestion alone rather than

narrative mimesis. The public execution scene in Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives Tale*, for example, has its narrative grounded by carefully metered language through which symbolic imagery, intended to correspond with the protagonist's agonies, is used to evoke a reader's empathy. In describing the scene, David Lodge, in his *Modes of Modern Writing*, writes that

Phallic guillotines are not the kind of thing we expect to find in realistic fiction, surely? But if there is any truth in the Freudian account of the mind, there is of course no reason why such things should not appear in the literary rendering of 'reality'. The point is simply that in realism we have to look very hard for them, we have to go down very deep to find them, because 'in reality' they are hidden, latent, suppressed. ... Realism is a mode of writing derived from consciousness rather than the unconscious, the daylight rather than the nighttime world, the ego rather than the id: that is why it is such an excellent mode for *depicting* repression. [Lodge's emphasis] (32)

Ultimately, one contrasting feature between the two modes of writing, modernist and traditional realist, lies in the manner in which they choose to depict psychological trauma. Somewhat paradoxically, the realist text is more faithful in depicting, as Lodge suggests, repression than is the modernist which focuses on mimetic expressions of trauma.

Woolf's and Stein's stream-of-consciousness narratives, for example, are intended to suggest to the reader a way of thinking that is synonymous with the character's individual and relativistic position. Their writing creates a mimetic effect where thought patterns corresponds to the psychological event. The demise of

Septimus Warren-Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* serves as a ready example:

Holmes was coming upstairs. Holmes would burst open the door. Holmes would say, 'In a funk, eh?' Holmes would get him. But no; not Holmes; not Bradshaw. Getting up rather unsteadily, hopping indeed from foot to foot, he considered Mrs. Filmer's nice clean bread-knife with 'Bread' carved on the handle. Ah, but one mustn't spoil that. The gas fire? But it was too late now. Holmes was coming . . . But he would wait until the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down onto Mrs Filmer's area railings. (159-60)

The fragmentary nature of the narrative, the paranoia of Septimus' thought processes and finally, his vainly heroic cry, all give the reader the impression of his mental state.

As comparisons, Bennett's and Woolf's writing demonstrate the dramatic differences between modernist and traditional narrative strategies. As this chapter will suggest, Graves' interests in psychoanalysis as well as reader-narrator-author relationships reflect a sympathy, or, at the very least, an absorption of some modernist techniques (which Graves knew well, as has been demonstrated through his remarks on the poetry of the period in the previous chapter) as well as conventional Victorian novelistic principles. The point is not to argue for Graves being a modernist; nor to argue that Graves' writing is dredged from a Victorian archive either. Rather, his writing mediates the experimentalism of one movement with the traditions of another.

If we accept Joyce as being exemplary of the modernists, we can begin to see the trouble that Graves was having in relating to his peers. Their intentional stylistic obscurity was problematic to Graves as was the apparent subjectivity of their narratives. Stephen Spender, in *The Struggle of the Modern*, describes the stylistic materials from which modernist writers built their works as

... all-inclusive works, mansions themselves containing many mansions, but without foundations. Foundations were not planned, partly because a modern house should be made of materials that need no foundations, but more significantly because the attempt to build foundations meant inevitably reverting to beliefs or philosophies which were fragmented, partisan, not capable of dealing with the modern experience as a whole, and for that reason reverting to the past. (257)

The supposition that those writers considered modernist somehow felt the fragmentation of self and society more acutely simply because their writing deals with such issues more expressly is rather prescriptive. Graves' historical novels in particular and writings in general, in contrast, have very firm historical, philosophical and structural foundations, but Graves' tenement had once crumbled too—in Graves' case, the disintegration came in the form of psychological trauma resulting from his time in the trenches and persisted through his years of struggle as a neurasthenic. Dennis Brown, in *The Modernist Self*, holds Graves' poetry of the 1920s as a model "in literary-historical terms" and considers that "it is worth noting how innovative this writing is in its awareness of modern psychological insights and terms, and how 'Modernist', in fact, it feels at times" (58).

Graves' writing of this period has more than a modernist "feeling" to it. In the twenties, he was, quite clearly, wrestling with the notions of modernity championed by Laura Riding and they began to dominate his writing. The epilogue to Graves' 1929 edition of *Good-Bye to All That* (dedicated to Laura Riding) demonstrates, amongst other things, Graves' awareness of the modernist concern with the mutability of the reception of time and its effect on the individual. Graves begins the epilogue by explaining why he chose not to include Riding in the body of his autobiography. He claims that "by mentioning you [Riding] as a character in my autobiography I would seem to be denying you in your true quality of one living invisibly, against kind, as dead, beyond event" (321). In other words, by appearing in the autobiography, Riding, as a person who was, at the time, very much a part of Graves' life, would have her past cast immutably as a textual present. She would, for ever, remain known, at least to Graves' readers, in the way he describes her rather than as a living, breathing and *changing* individual.

This same concern is raised in the first and last stanzas of the poem "Against Kind" which was published in the same year as *Good-Bye*:

Become invisible by elimination

Of kind in her, she none the less persisted

Among kind with no need to find excuses

For choosing this and not some alien region.

...

And she must stay discrete, as they are blind

For ever, or for one time less than ever

If they, despaired and turning against kind,

Become invisible too, and read her mind. (*Centenary*, 61-2)

Clearly, while Graves was determined to say “Good-Bye to you and to you and to you and to me and to all that” (5), Riding was not to be included in that breezy catalogue. Nor, was Riding to be a part of what Graves described as the biography’s “geographical treatment of chaps” (5).

Graves was only too aware of the relativism of his perception of his relationship with Riding and the other figures in his own life. A biographical “treatment of chaps” was necessarily “geographical” as Graves knew. By this he meant that his treatment of the “chaps” in his life was always going to be oriented in relation to his perception of them. Graves knew he could only know “them” as distant, misty, islands off the shore of his continental centre. This was a theory which did not remain in Graves’ 1957 revision of *Good-Bye to All That*. Not only the dedicatory epilogue, but his entire preamble which explains his sensitivity to the modernist issue of relativism was expurgated.

The correctness, narratologically speaking, of Graves’ theory behind his motivation for absenting Riding from the catalogued events of his life is not overly important. But the effect of his application of the theory in terms of both content and stylistics parallels Graves, on a theoretical level, with the sort of autobiography written by David Jones. In fact, the closing lines of the dedicatory epilogue read virtually like Jones’ prose-poetic *In Parenthesis*:

After which.

After which, anecdotes of yours, travesties of the parable and so precious to me as vulgar glosses on it. How on April 27th, 1929 it was a fourth-storey window and a stone area and you were dying. And how it was a

joke between Harold the stretcher-bearer and myself that you did not die, but survived your dying, lucid interval.

After which.

After which, may I recall, since you would not care to do so yourself, with what professional appreciation (on May 16th) Mr. Lake is reported to have observed to those that stood by him in the operating theatre: 'It is rarely that one sees the spinal-cord exposed to view—especially at right-angles to itself.'

After which.

After which, let me also recall on my own account my story *The Shout*, which, though written two years ago, belongs here; blind and slow like all prophecies—it has left you out entirely. And, because you are left out, it is an anecdote of mine.

After which.

After which, even anecdotes fail. No more anecdotes. And, of course, no more politics, religion, conversations, literature, arguments, dances, drunks, time, crowds, games, fun, unhappiness. I no longer repeat to myself: 'He who shall endure to the end, shall be saved.' It is enough now to say that I have endured. My lung, still barometric of foul weather, speaks of endurance, as your spine, barometric of fair weather, speaks of salvation.

(322-3)

Quoting from the epilogue at length here is a necessary step in order to illuminate several key features of this unique (to what is commonly accepted as the Gravesian mode) piece of writing. Firstly, the style of the quoted passage is radically

different from the remainder of the autobiography. One can only speculate as to the reasons for the stylistic change, but it would not be wrong to conclude that the difference was a direct effect of the paradigmatic shift in Graves' attitude toward his subject. In other words, in 1929 it was not possible for Graves to write about Riding in the same narrative style as those "chaps" who comprise the "geographical features" of a biography (5). More importantly though, it marks the end of Graves' experiments with the style of modernist writing.

The effect of the dedicatory epilogue on the remainder of the autobiography is to distance the Graves of the present (moment of writing) from the Graves who was a participant in the events of the autobiography. Since he is writing the epilogue, we know that he has survived the traumas that formed the events of his life. The author of the epilogue is a changed person. His way is no longer the way of the figure whom we have come to know in the story he has told. Any moral culpability for the debacles that made-up his life that the reader may feel Graves should be held to is shrugged off by the epilogue. Effectively, Graves has said, "that was then, this is now and I am a changed and reformed character."

The first clue as to what Graves' intentions for the original epilogue might have been has to do with his use of dates and other forms of temporal reference. In the cited portion of the dedicatory epilogue, which reads very much like a private or personal address without many references from which a third-party might infer meaning, Graves' use of the two dates and temporal references from the present (the moment of writing) to the past (such as, "two years ago") provides the reader with the necessary keys with which to open the personal "secrets" for him or her self. Knowing the dates of the "travesties" to which Graves refers helps to ground them in

an autobiographical “truth” akin to the anecdotes of the “chaps” whom Graves knew from his war years (such as the suicide of Irish soldier in the trenches discussed in the introductory chapter)—truths that the passage is seemingly designed to evade. In other words, Graves has sign-posted the passage with markers which a curious reader would be able to use in order to extract meaning from that which is supposed to be elusive and without meaning.

The question which begs to be asked is whether Graves intended to ground the passage with public meaning and break the pledge that he had made to Riding not to include her in his autobiography, or whether the dates are written in with the same intention as the recursive “after which”: simply as a device with which to advance the narrative? The latter is possible. Modernists such as Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* and Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for just two such examples, invoke signs of the passage of time such as tolling bells as an acknowledgement that even the most stream-of-consciousness narratives are slave to certain narrative devices expected by the reader—narrative devices that acknowledge the irrepressible forward movement of time. Similarly, in telling the history of his life, Graves needed some sort of external reference to deploy in order to advance a narrative which would otherwise be suspended in an instant of its internalised monologue—an instant which would be impregnable, alien and incomprehensible to his readers.

While Graves was clearly very influenced by Riding, one must wonder how much he actually might have longed to have her hold over him broken. When one reflects on what Graves might have meant when he writes “no more politics, religion, ...” the entire epilogue begins to take on the tone of an elegy for the loss of freedom or a forced change from his habitual ways. The illusion presented by the passage is that

without “politics, religion, ...” his would be a world of bliss. However, there are also references which read as though there is a hint of regret masked within them:

“because you are left out, it is an anecdote of mine.” The word which almost begs to be inserted, that almost seems implied in this quoted line, is “merely”: “it is merely an anecdote of mine”. The “it”, of course, is his novella, *The Shout*.

By referring to *The Shout* Graves has left a significant clue for a possible subtext for the epilogue. *The Shout* was the first major piece of short fiction published by Graves. It appeared in the same year as *Good-Bye to All That* but according to Martin Seymour-Smith, was written in 1924 (117) which predates even *My Head! My Head!*.¹⁰ Graves’ insistence on the story being an “anecdote of mine” because Riding is also absent from it is significant. Graves did not meet Riding until January 2, 1926 (Seymour-Smith, 122). Her absence from the story as it was originally conceived is as obvious as her absence from the majority of the period covered by Graves’ autobiography. Yet, Graves mentions that the story was merely “anecdotal” while in the same line claiming that it was “prophetic” (though a “blind and slow” prophecy) (322-3).

A number of interesting allusions may be read from Graves’ rather ambiguous reference to, and contradictory commentary on, the story. The story contains and practises many of the conventions considered the domain of the modernists. The narrative is non-linear, the notion of the self is quite literally shown to be fragile and

¹⁰ R.P. Graves insists that the story was not completed until 1927 (*Years*, 25).

However, it is the premise of the story, not its realised content, that will be discussed here.

easily fragmented, and the story is permeated with a particular psychological unease manifested through the narrative confluence of polyphonous voices within the story.

All three of Graves' biographers note Graves' claim that the protagonist of *The Shout*, Richard, was a surrogate for himself (e.g. Seymour-Smith, 117). However, Seymour-Smith, while commenting on the peculiarity of Graves' reference to the story in the dedicatory epilogue to *Good-Bye*, writes: "Why did it 'belong' there? Because of course it omitted 'her' so absolutely that its deepest meaning (expressed in the title) lay in that omission" (118). The "deepest meaning", according to Seymour-Smith, is that the magician's shout can be paralleled with the practice of poetry in which Graves recognised "destructiveness" and "overtones even more sinister" (118). But Seymour-Smith does not offer an explanation of what he might mean by sinister overtones. He does claim, in an effort to extend the connection between the story and practice of poetry, that, "... [the shout] is not delivered by one of the right sex" (118). Presumably then, Seymour-Smith believes that the shout can be read as a metaphor for the siren-like calling of the Muse to the poet. A Muse calling, though, seems to impose an aspect of Graves' work which may not yet be due the attention Seymour-Smith gives to it.

Both Patrick Quinn and Michael Kirkham identify the importance of Graves' study, *The Meaning of Dreams*, to the poetry he was writing at the time. Quinn writes that "...Graves was afraid that psychoanalysis would dry up his inspiration as it cured his neurasthenia ..." (Quinn, 85). What has not been commented upon though, is that *The Shout* can be read as a story whose principal concern is exactly that which is identified by Graves in *The Meaning of Dreams* and which is recognised in his poetry. Crossley's psychological traumas can easily be paralleled with Graves' own,

while the frustration of the cuckolded Richard can be recognised for the other, non-poetic aspect of Graves' character. Where Crossley represents magic and experience, Graves, the neurasthenic soldier-poet in the story-as-autobiography can be clearly detected, while Richard can be read as the suppressed (or superseded) Graves of the middle-class, public-schoolboy upbringing. The narrator of the story then, is a third Graves: the one who hears Crossley's fantastic story (as Graves might interpret his own dreams) and then realises the horrifying reality in the fantasy:

I put my fingers to my ears and ran out of the scoring box. I had run perhaps twenty yards, when an indescribable pang of fire spun me about and left me dazed and numbed. I escaped death somehow; I suppose that I am lucky, like the Richard of the story. But the lightening struck Crossley and the doctor dead. (*Complete*, 21)

Not only does Graves blend traditional author/implicit-author boundaries in this story, he also transgresses conventional narrative limitations by giving each story embedded within the principal narrative a part in the tragic conflation of coincidence in the conclusion. Though the story is narrated without the usual modernist stylistic innovations, its metafictional construct charges the tale with extra-textual meaning.

Grevel Lindop, in the article cited earlier, offers yet another perspective on this narratological framework:

Perhaps the most obvious technical feature of 'The Shout' is that it presents an extreme instance of what Wayne C. Booth has usefully dubbed the 'unreliable narrator'. This is complicated by the use of a multilayered narrative, where one character's telling of a story is reported to us by another character, and so on. It is easy, for example, to fall into the casual assumption that the tale is

told by Crossley; but this is wrong on at least two counts. One of these counts is that the first narrator, through whom everything—including Crossley's narrative—is conveyed, is the anonymous first-person character who arrives at the Asylum cricket match with a broken finger and prepared to score.

Whether we should regard this character as a form of 'Robert Graves' is left unclear, an unclarity gleefully compounded by Graves's 1965 'Introduction' to the *Collected Short Stories* where he tells us that "Pure fiction is beyond my imaginative range; I fetched the main elements of *The Shout* from a cricket-match at Littlemore Asylum, Oxford" ...

The second and far more troubling count is that soon after the end of the story 'Crossley' is insisting that he is not Crossley at all, but Richard. Thus even if we believe every word spoken by the anonymous first narrator, the question must arise as to how much of 'Crossley's' narrative is actually spoken by Crossley.¹¹

The lengthy citation here has been important if only to underline the complexities of the issues surrounding the story, some of which contradict my own conclusions. The story seems to defy singular explanation. Indeed, Graves seems to challenge his reader within the story to make sense of the multiple layers of the narrative. The conventions of direct and indirect speech are completely ignored, which makes the analyst's (in this case the suggestion is that the analyst should be psychological) task nearly impossible. Illogic—madness—is preserved and so too, presumably, is the magic of poetic inspiration.

¹¹ From an unpublished manuscript submitted for *Gravesiana*, volume 1, number 4.

While *The Shout* certainly contains narratological complexities, its substance is by no means unique to Graves' repertoire. What remains, besides a sense of confusion for the reader, is startling. Ultimately, the horrifying reality realised in *The Shout* lies in the recognition of, metaphorically speaking, Graves' fear of death. Quinn observes that from Graves' self-analysis of his poem "The Gnat", the fear that the magical aspect of the Gravesian trinity from which the magician/poet produces his work, becomes threatened. And the possibility for the loss of magic (where magic is associated with the practice of writing poetry) is the horror of the story. When the narrator encounters Richard and Rachel after the events at the asylum, he receives the following soulless response:

Richard looked blank; Rachel said: 'Crossley? I think that was the man who called himself the Australian Illusionist and gave that wonderful conjuring show the other day. He had practically no apparatus but a black silk handkerchief. I liked his face so much. Oh, and Richard didn't like it at all.'

'No, I couldn't stand the way he looked at you all the time,' Richard said. (22)

Richard and Rachel are responding as though the fantastic story were nothing more than a dream or a fable. Graves' neurasthenia was, of course, nothing more than dream (though a legitimate and recognised trauma). The horrors which he suffered were real to no one else. Similarly, Richard and Rachel's blasé reaction to the story discredits the vivacity with which the narrator has recounted his incredible tale and reflects the tension Graves felt between himself as a war-veteran, poet, writer, and the conformity implicit in English society. In effect, Richard and Rachel can be seen to represent the bourgeois and common-sensical element of British society to whom

Graves was forced, as a result of their indifference to his neurasthenic traumas and literary aspirations, to say "good-bye".

Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* describes the division between Graves and society that he expressed so acutely:

Everyone who remembers a war first-hand knows that its images remain in the memory with special vividness. The very enormity of the proceedings, their absurd remove from the usages of the normal world, will guarantee that a structure of irony sufficient for ready narrative recall will attach to them. And the irony need not be Gravesian and extravagant ... (326)

But for Graves the irony was necessarily extravagant. Gravesian irony is predominantly situational and, furthermore, frustrating because it was Graves himself who was, unhappily, the central device for what must have begun to seem a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more distant the war became in collective societal memory expressed in media such as non-combatant popular fiction, then it was more than likely that his memoir would be read as a "kind of fiction" (Fussell, 310).

In Graves' case, the longer his neurasthenia persisted, then all the more the events that he had lived through began to be ascribed with an unreal and mythic quality. But the mental suffering itself was too real for such a fictional disengagement—a reality closely felt which produced a paradoxical state: his writing was charged because of his mental sufferings, and yet he was supposed to be writing to cure himself of the very stress which charged his writings. Such a state is expressible only through writings with deep and multiple degrees of irony.

Graves' frustration with his relationship with an uncaring society can be recognised in the resigned tone of the conclusion of *The Shout*. Just as the "myth"

which Crossley described and which was confirmed by the events that concluded the cricket match had its significance for the narrator abruptly lessened by Richard and Rachel's reaction, so too must Graves have begun to question the validity of his own experiences—a validity he desperately appealed for in *Good-Bye to All That* but which he ultimately denies in the dedicatory epilogue by describing them as “anecdotal”. Riding then, as the ideal listener/reader of his works, can be seen to be the catalyst for Graves' expurgation of his former self.

Through dedicating himself and his writing to her way of life and her approach to being-in-the-world, Graves is escaping his own unhappy experiences of the writing of his past to the future of writing offered by Riding:

Evasions

Streets move evasively and so do people.

Both chew their covert cuds and yet they are

Quite different. For streets have consciences

At street-corners and spit their cuds there at

The curb with lamp-posts for confessors.

But people only swallow theirs and go

To hide in houses, fearing edges and

Sharp turnings that might bring them face to face

With unexpected honesties or yet

A sudden crying ordinance to halt

Their apprehensive slinking in the streets

And call them fiercely to encounters there

With one another's eyes and ponderings.

And yet, because they go so nervously

And do not stop for scrutiny, shall we

Call caution furtiveness or rather say

That shunning candor, they find sanity. (Riding, "Evasions")

Clearly, Riding considered candour crude. As R.P. Graves argues in his biography, Riding forced her ideas about poetry as the controlling influence for the subject of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. This meant that as far as she was concerned, "... a superior poem 'makes its real meaning clearer and clearer, as it retreats from the average, i.e. as it becomes more and more obscure to the average reader'" (43).

Graves, at this stage of his career, accepted Riding's suggestions. Later, the substance of her issue for obfuscation became the subject of many of Graves' anti-modernist polemics.

Graves, as has been argued in the previous chapter, began to insist more and more fervently upon the "plain reader's" rights. His was not only a theoretical objection but one which he also practised. His fiction, poetry and scholarship are always plainly written. They are not obscured by jargon or obfuscating punctuation. That Riding, given all she stood for, was at odds with Graves and his popular and populist prose and poetry is not surprising. She had always insisted upon a radical break from English traditions akin to that made by other Americans in Europe like Eliot, Pound and Stein. Further, that Graves was finally liberated to write on subjects such as proper writing (the book he co-authored with Alan Hodge, *The Reader Over*

Your Shoulder) only after Riding's return to America speaks volumes about the atmosphere that must have subsumed his writing efforts in the 1930s.

The historical short stories examined below are, for the most part, written after the historical novels that are the primary subject of this study and also long after Riding's departure. If, as this thesis holds, the historical novels are the forum in which Graves established his narrative techniques for communicating his dire views on society through his failing heroes; then, the stories should be found to be a culmination of his development as a writer of fiction completely liberated from the dogmatic influence of Laura Riding and, by this time, also of a failing modernist movement.

The brevity of these works allows for a systematic dissection of their narrative strategies. Where the prologue to, and dedicatory epilogue from, the 1929 edition of *Good-Bye to All That*, as discussed above, prophecy Graves' tempestuous relationship with Riding and her belief-systems, the stories discussed below reflect the degree to which Graves' consciousness continued to grapple with similar social and psychological concerns through the 1950s.

The short story "Epics Are Out of Fashion" besides being witty and offering an insight into some of Graves' personal likes and dislikes amongst the Latin poets of Nero's court, reveals a narrative technique which is apparently simple, but which contains intricacies and subtleties that, upon close examination, recall the structure of some of Graves' best known historical novels.

The story is organised around a similar tension between "amazing event" and blasé reaction that comprises *The Shout*. The story describes, from the point of view of its narrator, the demise of Lucan and Petronius in Nero's court. Lucan, foolishly

according to Petronius, is in the process of writing his epic poem on the Civil Wars. Nero, at the same time, is endeavouring to complete a similar project. The danger to Lucan in the story is clear: an arrogant and egotistical Nero would be unable to acknowledge that his underling, Lucan, was a better poet. Had Nero's epic been declaimed contemporaneously with Lucan's, the public would have seen the lesser quality of Nero's verses (for as Petronius tells us, "'nobody denies that you're [Lucan] the greatest poet in the world...'" (119)). Nero, naturally, had to dispatch Lucan (or at the very least his epic) before his public humiliation were allowed to occur.

Petronius strongly, yet tactfully, recommends that Lucan cease writing by claiming that "epics are ridiculously out of fashion!" (117). Lucan becomes infuriated with what he recognises as censure by Nero and declaims his work at a public banquet. Nero then orders Lucan not to write any more verse, Lucan becomes enraged with this infringement on what he perceives to be his artistic right and begins plotting to assassinate Nero. Nero discovers the plot and orders Lucan to open his wrists in a warm bath. Before dispatching himself, Lucan condemns Petronius to Nero by explaining the subversive image of Nero that Petronius has sketched as a part of his "Trimalchio portrait". A panicky Nero decides that it is time that the court be "cleansed", and so Seneca and others are ordered to "the baths". A general sense of panic takes over the court which is the moment that the narrator chooses to flee Rome for Greece. From the relative safety of Greece, the narrator writes his account of the events.

A feature that emerges from this story that might almost be described as characteristic of Graves' fiction is the narrator's representation of himself to his

audience. In “Epics Are Out of Fashion”, the narrator presents himself as a dullard who is by familial connections intimately associated with the figures about whom the story takes place—figures in whom the reader is, by the narrator’s stated intentions, intended to hold an interest more significant than in himself. But it is the speaker who, ultimately, attracts the most attention by subtle and suggestive narrative turns: it is as a result of the narrator’s actions that Petronius is first allowed to tell Lucan of Nero’s scandalous proclamation, and it is the narrator whom Petronius implores to appeal to Lucan in order to prevent him from antagonising Nero further (an appeal the narrator never makes to Lucan).

Graves’ *Good-Bye to All That* is a very good example of a “story”—an “autobiography”—which is fascinating in itself but a story whose substance is overshadowed by the narrator’s presence. Graves begins *Good-Bye to All That* by summarily accounting for the “stock” events of his life in a very matter-of-fact tone: “As a proof of my readiness to accept autobiographical convention, let me at once record my two earliest memories” (1957, 9). As the self-deprecatory tone of this and many other passages indicates, the speaker is not whom the reader is *supposed* to have his or her interest held by. Rather, the story of the autobiographer’s life rather than the autobiographer himself is what is *supposed* to be gripping. Through a distancing of himself from the narrative, Graves organises the retelling of his life-story such that he seems more an observer than a participant in the events; or, at least, that his participation is negligible and certainly uninteresting relative to the “chaps” about whom he has written: much like the narrator of “Epics Are Out of Fashion”.

In the case of *Good-Bye to All That*, the story of a young man’s war experiences and his subsequent realisation that his country has betrayed him and

thousands of others like him, is what is “supposed” to interest the reader. But the speaker is telling a well-known tale and we, the readers, find ourselves drawn toward him, his idiosyncrasies, and his personality more than a story which, as has been demonstrated by a number of his peers such as Blunden and Sassoon, is flawed by inaccuracies in fundamental details. Graves, clearly, was not very interested in getting “facts” right.

Graves’ use of “untruths”, or at the very least transmitting events which were merely colloquial tales in the mess-halls of the infantry as personal experience,¹² confuses conventional critical receptions of autobiography. Indeed, traditional structuralist-critical techniques are beguiled by an author who shows autobiographical convention so little respect. Graves, clearly, was more interested in an oral story-telling tradition, a story-telling which is more concerned with moral guidance for the audience than with journalistically faithful reportage of fact. While the fictions of the mess-hall may or may not have actually been experienced by any one soldier, they amount to a story of the collective myth of the soldiering experience—a collective myth grounded in truth because *someone*, if not the narrator, then someone else, experienced the events and, therefore, the experience is meaningful.

Wallace Martin describes this complication for structuralist analysis in his work *Recent Theories of Narrative*:

¹² Blunden and Sassoon marked-up a copy of a *Good-Bye to All That* demonstrating the moments where Graves’ facts were wrong. The “mistakes” identified by the two soldier-poets are referred to by R.P. Graves in an appendix to his 1995 edited version of the 1929 edition of *Good-Bye to All That*.

In almost every respect, the questions the anthropologist must try to answer are the opposite of those posed by the literary critic: not “why is this story unique?” but “how and why is it so similar to others?”; not “what did this (identifiable) author mean?” but “what function does this (anonymous) collective myth serve when it is repeated on certain occasions?” For the critic, a single work is the locus of meaning; the anthropologist seldom treats less than several versions of a tale. (23-4)

Graves engages an anthropologist’s perspective toward his autobiographical writing practices. Where convention (high-lighted by Blunden and Sassoon’s reaction) demands accuracy, Graves’ method insists on an accuracy for the spirit or mood of the experiential moment. Martin’s theories will become especially useful in later chapters dealing with Graves’ surveys of myth; however, his authorial relationship with fact, fiction and myth is clearly established in such early works as *Good-Bye to All That*.

In “Epics Are Out of Fashion” the narrator is endowed by the author with the ability to make intuitive and insightful observations but while so doing is made to seem oblivious to the profound implications of his own words. In this, he resembles Booth’s unreliable narrator. Additionally, in distancing himself from his implied author’s voice and actions, Graves is working from a tradition of narrative as “personal history” or fictional autobiography which stretches back through the history of the novel. The story is recounted by a naïve narrator who appears to be a proverbial “straw-man” set-up by Graves to be knocked down in the tradition of the “everyman” of parables and fables for the betterment of the reader.

Entering the text as readers with a willing suspension of disbelief, we are drawn into moral culpability with a narrator who, like so many others in Graves' fiction (such as Graves' Claudius, whose apparent ineptitude saves him from certain destruction during Caligula's reign in *I, Claudius*), casts a naïve aura in order to preserve his life. The narrator of "Epics Are Out of Fashion" is no exception. Despite the attempts on the part of Petronius to engage him in a futile attempt to prevent Lucan's rash actions, our narrator flees from the "cleansing" of the courts by his tyrannical emperor—long enough, anyway, to pen the story.

Argentarius, the fictional author and survivor of the debacles that make up the plot of "Epics Are Out of Fashion", closes his tale with a self-deprecatory gesture: "Thank goodness I was stupid at school, and never felt any literary ambitions whatsoever! But nobody in Rome could touch me as a long-distance man ..." (119). Graves' dexterity in handling his subject comes through very clearly in this passage. The last two sentences of the story create a clever "inconclusion" by employing the ellipses as the closing punctuation. The dangling ending begs for an explanation for what remains unsaid by Argentarius: Why is Argentarius in such a hurry? Has he said too much? Is he about to move on? Or has he met his end at the hands of one of Nero's agents and so been prevented from finishing his story?

The latter seems unlikely. Argentarius' character as a resourceful manipulator of situations remains sound to the end of the tale and, one suspects, beyond. His words read "true" to an audience who have suspended their disbelief. Lucan and Petronius are dead; Argentarius lives on—unashamedly. However, one can also read the ellipses as an "opening" to a new, unwritten, narrative—a punctuation which

wryly hints at the implied author's awareness of his own ironical position in relation to the "truth" of the story he has just told.

In a letter to Karl Gay, his former literary secretary, on the subject of his translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia* held in the St. John's College Robert Graves Trust archive, Graves writes:

If Lucan were any better [Graves' emphasis] I should not continue; but he is so gloriously bad that I shall with a forward reassure uneducated readers that they miss nothing by not having the original before them. It is a sort of object lesson in how not to write poetry, and gives a wonderful insight into the mind of a typical awful Roman of the 1st century. (20/1/55)

While working on the translation, Graves' wrote *Epics Are Out of Fashion* for *Punch*.

If Graves considered Lucan a "typical awful Roman", then the implied author's ironical position becomes abundantly clear: there was nothing much to save in the infighting at Nero's court other than himself.

The 1957 edition of *Good-Bye to All That* ends in a similar tone:

Yet I do not seem to have changed much, mentally or physically, since I came to live here [Mallorca], though I can no longer read a newspaper without glasses, or run upstairs three steps at a time, and have to watch my weight. And if condemned to relive those lost years I should probably behave again in very much the same way; a conditioning in the Protestant morality of the English governing classes, though qualified by mixed blood, a rebellious nature, and an overriding poetic obsession, is not easily outgrown. (281)

Yet, the prologue to the same work offers a Puck-like apology: "If any passage still gives offence after all those years, I hope to be forgiven." The counterpointing effect of these two apologies demonstrates Graves' sensitivity for the subject-matter—after all, the subject is his own life. But while mistakes made can be regretted, the reassurance for the reader is to hear the author's affirmation that he would, upon reflection, "behave again in very much the same way." Like *Argentarius*, Graves abandoned what he perceived to be a Neroesque cleansing-court in 1929 (for example, former friends and colleagues such as Sassoon and Blunden publicly criticising Graves' work) and in the prologue and epilogue written for the 1957 edition, Graves clearly shows no regret for having done so.

But is there something more which Graves wants to tell with *Argentarius*' story beyond offering an alternative reading of the assassination plot on Nero's life? Is *Argentarius*, like Graves, hinting that he too would live life the same way again? A trace of the sub-text which Graves' narrator is unwittingly constructing can be discovered through an examination of *Argentarius*' character.

Argentarius does not judge his or others' actions on a bourgeois moral or ethical scale. The measure of the moral is left by Graves for the reader. *Argentarius*, who ends his story with the structurally convenient ellipses, proves himself to be of a questionable moral fibre. He describes how he has run straight from Lucan's banquet with "all the gold [he] could cram into a satchel." He has no shame in being a coward or expressing with near glee that "Petronius was in for it too!" (119). How are we to judge this man then?

A moment's reflection can potentially justify *Argentarius*' sense of relief in learning that Petronius "was in for it"; after all, it was Petronius who informed

Argentarius of Lucan's foolish plan to write an epic on the Civil Wars. Since Argentarius had done nothing to curtail Lucan's epistolary pursuit, he, too, could have been connected with "the crime". With Petronius, the only person who remained alive that could demonstrate Argentarius' complicity in the affair, finding himself "in for it too", Argentarius was not likely to be implicated. Read in this manner, Argentarius was saving his own skin at the expense of the lives of those around him. Ultimately, not to be heroic but to survive seems to be the lesson that we are to learn from Argentarius' adventure.

Clearly, one must dig to find anything that is "likeable" about Argentarius; however, he would not have been around to write the story had he indulged in the time to pause and reflect on the impending fate of his family and friends, and certainly would not be telling us this story had he taken the time to offer them his assistance. The use of the first-person, in this sense, reduces the drama of the tale. Argentarius had to be alive to tell his story and so, obviously, survived the events of the narrative. What remains unclear is if Graves wants us to see Argentarius as someone attempting to "dupe" his readers into a complicity with him and his apparent innocence or, if Argentarius has, in fact, determined to be amoral in a world without scruples as a means by which to forestall the end that Nero's court was determined to make inevitable.

If we consider the latter, we might have an explanation for Argentarius' defensive posture when he informs his audience that he was "stupid in school, and never felt any literary ambitions whatsoever". This posture strikes me as being somewhat analogous to Graves' frequent statements on the inconsequence of his own fictional works—on their being nothing more than "pot-boilers".

Most studies of Graves' *Claudius* books will, at some point, make mention of the similarities between Graves' persona and his protagonist. Martin Seymour Smith, for example, observed that "[Graves'] misunderstood central character was an oblique caricature (but by no means a portrait) of himself—more particularly of his situation" (231). "His situation", according to Seymour Smith and R.P. Graves, was an awkward struggle with his burgeoning popularity as the author of *I, Claudius* and Laura Riding's reticence to admit the "validity" of historical novels on the whole and her outrage at the recognition Graves was receiving for them (*Years*, 224). Ironically, by 1935, Riding was working on a historical novel of her own, *A Trojan Ending*, for which, according to Graves' diary of that same year, he was doing a substantial portion of the historical research.

Two poems that Graves wrote shortly after the publication of *I, Claudius* exemplify his struggle with the intellectual impasse he and Riding had reached—an intellectual impasse very similar to the one prophesied in *The Shout* and which was supposed to have been bid "good-bye" in *Good-Bye to All That*. "The Devils Advice to Story-Tellers" and "To Bring the Dead to Life" are both rather didactic works which clearly outline Graves' process as well the "Argentarian" posture he was encouraged to take by Riding with respect to his works.

In "The Devils Advice to Story-Tellers", Graves pits "conventional" wisdom against "devilish" advice to a would-be writer. Conventional wisdom says that, "Lest men suspect your tale to be untrue, / Keep probability—some say— in view." In other words, he is advising the writer that no matter how incredible the story might be, the writer should make it sure it seems credible in order to keep his or her audience attuned to the message. However, the devilish advice in the poem is to:

Weigh out no gross of probabilities,
 Nor yet make diligent transcriptions of
 Known instances of virtue, crime or love.
 To forge a picture that will pass for true,
 Do conscientiously what liars do—
 Born liars, not the lesser sort that raid
 The mouths of others for their stock-in-trade:
 Assemble, first, all casual bits and scraps
 That may shake down into a world perhaps;
 People this world, by chance created so,
 With random persons whom you do not know—
 The teashop sort, or travellers in a train
 Seen once, guessed idly at, not seen again;
 Let the erratic course they steer surprise
 Their own and your own and your readers' eyes;
 Sigh then, or frown, but leave (as in despair)
 Motive and end and moral in the air;
 Nice contradiction between fact and fact
 Will make the whole read human and exact.

The third and fourth lines from the end of the poem, "Sigh then, or frown, but leave
 (as in despair) / Motive and end and moral in the air;" seem to parallel the conclusion
 of "Epics Are Out of Fashion", the dedicatory epilogue from *Good-Bye*, and *The
 Shout*, almost exactly. From this "devilish" advice, one can conclude that motive,
 moral, all manner of closure, should be avoided. Deceptively simple moralistic tales,

it is suggested, are, in fact, slippery and evasive. Their conclusions are, in fact, never clear. Graves' narrators are so ambiguous and their manner of retelling stories are so firmly a part of the story itself, that the "exactness" the narrators proffer to be presenting, is merely human exactness; in other words, not very exact at all.

What this method is, is in part revealed through the story of Graves' "discovery" of the White Goddess myth while researching the Argonaut legend for his novel *Hercules, My Shipmate*. The introduction to *Hercules, My Shipmate* is dominated by critical commentary (in the exegetical style of *The Greek Myths* and *The Hebrew Myths*) on the sources for his rewriting of the myths as well as an explanation of the importance of the Goddess to the Argo's voyage. The level of critical commentary demonstrates that Graves did not take his facts lightly. Before reinterpreting what had been "conventionally" known, Graves took great pains to establish his facts. However, unlike his exegetical introductions or his scholarly studies, these longer fictional works similarly evade a simple form of closure and, instead, thrive upon an ambiguity which belies the superficial simplicity of the stories.

Furthermore, biographical studies show us that for Graves, it was important to "know" the persons and the places that he wrote about. To that end, as Seymour Smith writes, Graves soaked himself in the atmosphere of ancient Rome (229). His attention to detail was such that, as R.P. Graves notes, Eirlys Roberts, who had been asked to proof-read *I, Claudius* for historical accuracy, was only able to detect one error: "the wrong colour to the hem of the prostitutes' gowns" (207). Graves may have been interested in reinterpreting history, but it is abundantly clear that he was not willing to sacrifice historical authenticity in his period-fiction.

Martin Seymour Smith in quoting a portion of *The Devils Advice to Story Tellers* in his account of the publication history of *I, Claudius* skips the lines,

People this world, by chance created so,
 With random persons whom you do not know—
 The teashop sort, or travellers in a train
 Seen once, guessed idly at, not seen again;
 Let the erratic course they steer surprise
 Their own and your own and your readers' eyes;

“Random persons”, “erratic courses”; these do not seem the sort of materials with which to build an historical novel as precise as *I, Claudius*. Perhaps the presence of this seeming contradiction is why Seymour-Smith has excluded the lines from his study. But Seymour-Smith seems more intent on connecting Graves with a Hardy-esque tradition of writing than he is in uncovering any possible innovations in Graves' writing. Seymour-Smith's neglected stanza does tend to muddy the waters to an extent.

The devilish advice can be, at least in part, compared to Graves' method. For example, in “Epics Are Out of Fashion”, Graves' attention to detail cannot be as precise as it is in *I, Claudius* due to the brevity of the tale; however, the figures hardly seem created by “chance”. Lucan and Petronius, not to mention Nero, are, obviously, very real historical figures. But historical accounts do not agree with Graves' view that Lucan was at the centre of the plot to assassinate Nero “in the name of artistic freedom” (135). For this “tidy” end, Graves is, indeed, making use of “Nice contradiction between fact and fact [that] / Will make the whole read human and exact.” Truth to the randomness and unpredictability of human nature produces

narratives that are less likely to mimic the realism of 19th century literature and are more likely to correspond with modernist concerns. If he had abandoned realism and verisimilitude, then his coercive moral teachings would have been too apparent and would not have been able to bear the same effect that he gained through subtlety.

Graves' discomfort with Riding's emergent modernist relationship with history is made apparent through some of his diary entries of the time. The entry for Graves' diary for Wednesday, March 6, 1935 includes the following comment:

Went over *Remembering War*, *To Walk on Hills*, *Advice to Storytellers*, *To Bring the Dead to Life* and *The Goblet* with Laura. The first two and the last had already been seen by her and recast, according to her suggestions. She now passed them all with only two emendations.

Why did Graves not show Riding "Advice to Storytellers" and "To Bring the Dead to Life" before this meeting? According to his diary, he began both works on the 26th and the 28th of February of that same year. Each had been through six drafts before reaching Riding on March 6th. The diary does not mention an addition of "The Devil's" to the title of "Advice to Storytellers". One may only speculate on the emendations made by Riding or on why Graves felt compelled to point out that she had not seen the two poems just discussed prior to this editing session. However, what does seem to be stressed by the omissions is the tension between the two writers around the issue of the validity of historical fiction. Riding's belief was that history was dead. The moment and the future were all that could be real. Graves, clearly, believed in a living, continuous and tragically cyclical history: just like the overriding theme of the short story "'The Tenement': A Vision of Imperial Rome".

“The Tenement” story is on the other side of the “devilish advice” practised in “Epics Are Out of Fashion”. In this story, Graves casts known historical figures into the background and gives us instead a meticulously detailed study of a day in the life of a rent collector and his tragic end in the collapse of a tenement building. The almost obsessive attention to detail allows Graves to show off an intimate knowledge of Roman life. For example, rising from bed, Egnatius, the narrator, describes how he is dressed by his slave:

He drapes one toga-end over my left shoulder, letting it fall to the thigh; next, winds the straight edge round the back of my neck and under the right arm, then grabs the mass of material low down and throws the other toga-end past the first, so that it hangs behind me. Finally, he fixes the ‘naval boss’ at my midriff. That leaves me warmly swathed, except for the right shoulder, and provides a capacious pocket at chest level. (137)

Surely, this rent collector was not created merely by “chance”. The hopes and desires that Graves tells us belong to the rent collector are deeply personal. But perhaps more engagingly, the almost mundane personal details that Graves presents such as the collector *feeling* “warmly swathed” after having been dressed raise the rent collector above a character who was merely, according to the devilish advisor and/or Riding, “guessed idly at” to one who is known intimately.

Again, “The Tenement” is told from the first-person narrative perspective. How though, does this narrator come to write his story if it ends with his death in the crumbling of “The Tenement”? The answer to this apparent paradox is in a stunning self-reflexive narrative construction. Graves provides us with a direct reference to the

relationship between himself and his implied author. In this case, the narrator is reborn as Graves. The story ends:

Did any of us survive? I doubt it. My next distinct memory is of being a child once more. Martial music sounds. Mother lifts me up to watch, through a well-glazed English nursery window, the decorated carriages and red-coated soldiers of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession. (279)

The slippage from implied to actual narrator employed by Graves challenges the very convention of autobiography. If Graves feels that he can represent himself *actually* as an historical personage without "resorting" to conventional rhetorical framing devices, then what effect does this transgression have on the "truth" and validity of his historical revisions? The sceptical response would clearly have to be "harmful".

Analeptic "research" can hardly be taken seriously by a scholar; however, this query does raise a vital issue. How serious was Graves about the mental "time travels" he made in his analeptic researching techniques? According to those scholars with whom Graves worked, not very. Raphael Patai, Graves' co-author of the *Hebrew Myths*, claims throughout the memoir of his collaboration with Graves that Graves' historical reading and research was intensive. Patai does describe some of Graves' errant conclusions in his reworking of biblical myths as "pure Gravesian conjectures" (Patai, 31) thereby implying that conjectures occurred with some frequency; however, he also admits that Graves was ready to seek scholarly support for his ideas:

Graves found numerous individual rites he claimed were re-enacted at the coronation of Jesus. So, as he later told me in the course of one of our long conversations in his home in Deya, it was my "Hebrew Installation Rites" that

gave the solid foundation to what he had only suspected years before when he wrote his *King Jesus*. (33)

One, it should be admitted, can assume that Graves was, to a certain degree, playing to an “adoring” audience. A writer who conducts his research by travelling backward through time strikes a more interesting pose than one who spends days and weeks with his nose buried in books. Graves, it can be concluded, was perhaps not the most sound of scholars when it came to researching historical material but neither was he simply a charlatan who “guessed idly at” moments of the past.

So why then create these associations with pseudo-mysticism which, quite frankly, can lead to questions about the author’s integrity? In discussing *I, Claudius*, Richard Perceval Graves makes a very astute observation on what makes the narrative techniques practised in that novel so effective:

Graves’ use of the first person, usually a great risk for a novelist because of the considerable restrictions which it imposes upon him, succeeds brilliantly as an effective contrast to the horrors with which the novel is filled.

Graves,—as Claudius—writes that he wishes his ‘eventual readers of a hundred generations ahead, or more’ to feel themselves ‘directly spoken to, as if by a contemporary’; and he adopts the same cool, laconic, matter-of-fact, almost conversational approach which had helped to make *Good-Bye to All That* such a success. (189)

While the conclusion of Graves’ *Tenement* story can be read as somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Graves does, nevertheless, offer himself to be a little bit “Roman”, at least in mind. Interestingly, the two short stories discussed above were written twenty to twenty-five years after the publication of *I, Claudius*. Whatever compelled Graves to

produce this latter “pot boiler” was still lingering within him. Stylistically, not much can be seen to have changed between the three works, and the associations between Graves and his narrators remains passionately strong.

In his poem *To Bring the Dead to Life*, Graves explains the process of “assuming” an ancient character’s identity for a writer’s purposes:

To bring the dead to life

Is no great magic.

Few are wholly dead:

Blow on a dead man’s embers

And a live flame will start.

Let his forgotten griefs be now,

And now his withered hopes;

Subdue your pen to his handwriting

Until it prove as natural

To sign his name as yours.

Limp as he limped,

Swear by the oaths he swore;

If he wore black, affect the same;

If he had gouty fingers,

Be yours gouty too.

Assemble tokens intimate of him—

A seal, a cloak, a pen:

Around these elements then build

A home familiar to

The greedy revenant.

So grant him life, but reckon

That the grave which housed him

May not be empty now:

You in his spotted garments

Shall yourself lie wrapped.

The last stanza of this poem has an ominous tone. In these closing lines, Graves has decided that the revenant is greedy; that the past of the raised may become the present of the necromancer; that the writer may be forced to take the revenant's place in his spotted garments and take responsibility for his "spotted" past. This bleak vision is tempered, somewhat, by the qualifier, "may", in that Graves seems to be saying that one only "may" suffer this fate—that the fate is not accomplished; however, the mood created by the character's "forgotten griefs", "withered hopes", "gouty fingers", "limp", "greed" and "spotted garments" as having the potential to haunt if one dares try to raise him, is unmistakable. According to this poem, Graves most certainly regrets having breathed life into Claudius' embers.

Riding's dissatisfaction with Graves' successes may be one source for his personal regrets (and this poem was also not seen by Riding until it had received several revisions); however, there may be something more to it than that. What was Graves' purpose in distorting the history of Nero's assassination attempt in "Epics

Are Out of Fashion”? Graves was not known to mistake historical details of this sort unless there was some intention to his “oversight”. One moral which comes out of the story is a “warning” against trying to tackle the courts of a self-appointed literary giant. According to Suetonius, Nero is said to have uttered, upon his death, the words, “Dead! And so great an artist!” (Suetonius, 243). Graves despised this sort of pomposity amongst his contemporaries. By writing a parable based loosely on the history of Nero’s bloody purge of his court after his suspicions of a plot against his life had been raised, Graves may have found an opportunity to take a “poke” at some of his less-than-favourite peers and their attitudes discussed in the introductory chapter by comparing them to the famous corrupt Roman emperor and the “typical awful Romans” of his court.

We may perhaps discover something in Argentarius’ behaviour that parallels Graves’ own antagonistic relationship with his contemporary literary community—just as we can trace Graves’ shifts in those falling in and out of his favour through the expurgations and “corrections” made between the ‘29 and ‘57 editions of *Good-Bye to All That*—and in this way warrant a potential justification, or at least an understanding, for Argentarius’ ambiguous relationship with morality.

The thematic connections between *Count Belisarius* and *Good-Bye to All That*, for example, can be, on a basic level, obvious—both works are about soldiers—however, Graves’ manipulation of a large variety of historical evidence allowed him to make decisions on which passages from the disparate historical accounts to use. The differences between the recorded histories gave Graves authorial licence to manipulate historical “evidence” in order to suit his thematic purposes. An apparent irony in Graves’ technique emerges in the closing pages of *Count Belisarius* when

Graves reveals the process of his own novel by explaining (what his narrator perceived to be) Procopius' bitterness: "Sometimes [Procopius] told the truth, sometimes he distorted the facts, sometimes he lied—according to his vindictive purposes" (*Count* 546). The process which Graves parallels himself with is the one he observes Procopius to have used. Procopius is portrayed in the novel as a calculated manipulator with "vindictive purpose". However, Graves contrasts this "vindictive purposefulness" with his narrator's voice which is portrayed as an honest one. The implied alignment with Procopius is in structure and method only. Graves' fictional narrator was a tool through which Graves could address the problem with Procopius and his contemporaries and how they have (mis)represented the fate of Belisarius for whom it is quite clear that Graves felt a soldierly sympathy—a misrepresentation that Graves wanted to see corrected.

On one level, Graves' Belisarius novel bears on the reader's sympathy through the narrator's sincerity (unreliable though that narrator may be). As a character in Graves' novel, Eugenius does not stand to gain from being "untruthful". Such parallels between Eugenius in *Count Belisarius* and the other narrators in this chapter are unmistakable. In presenting himself to the reader, the narrator describes himself as, "a person of little importance, a mere domestic" (3). The narrator's criticism of Procopius amplifies Belisarius' tragedy since, according to Eugenius, Belisarius was not only treated cruelly in life, but also in remembrance. Through this subtle subtext, Graves continues his attack on the society which he shows to have been "turn-coatish" in *Good-Bye to All That*. On another level, the representation of Belisarius, stripped of rank and status, blinded and left to beg for coppers with St. Bartimaeus' wooden bowl in front of the monastery dedicated to "Job the Prophet" (557-9) draws

the reader's empathy at a most primary level. Similarly, Graves depicts soldiers like Sassoon in *Good-Bye to All That* as valiant warriors who were, in turn, exploited by profiteers and vote-scrounging politicians who saw only the "horrors" of the front while on a gentrified "Cook's Tour" (1957, 205).

While Eugenius is infinitely likeable and Argentarius' ethics are questionable, both narrators are honest. At least, Graves constructs them to appear to be honest. And, in a certain light, we are drawn to Argentarius from the opening lines of "Epics Are Out of Fashion": "Petronius did his best. He wasn't a bad fellow at heart, though he had the foulest mind in Rome and drank like a camel" (131). This humorous opening immediately allies the reader with Argentarius. While he may slip in our estimation as a result of his apparent cowardice and treachery, we do not have any reason to believe his story any less than we do the accuracy of his witty asides.

When we take into consideration Graves' passion for re-writing and re-assessing myths and histories, the responsibility of the narrator who is representing Graves' findings becomes critical. The narrator is Graves' principal rhetorical tool. Our disbelief may be suspended when we enter the story, but Graves makes sure we are aware of where it has been hung. In this sense, Graves holds our hands through his works. The stories are to be enjoyed, but he makes sure we read them as more than simply a pleasant "tale". Graves was too outspoken a critic and too voluminous a writer to ignore the self-referential intertextuality of his broad subject areas. In a sense, Graves is like the psychoanalyst who makes his patient aware of the effect of transferences. His stories are psychologically astute. And, as the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, this methodology applies to his longer historical fiction as well.

For these reasons, Graves' own criticism of his greatly ignored historical novels as "pot boilers" must be taken with a grain of salt. Laura Riding's advice to write history in a modernist style may indeed be like the "devil" giving advice to a story teller. The modernist style was held in such high estimation by literary critics that those who did not practise the methodology overtly, like Graves, may indeed have found it as hypocritical and bloody as Nero's court. Perhaps then, it was safer for Graves to play its fool and so survive to become one of its most prolific and long-lasting writers. After 1929, little remains in Graves' style that can be called modernist. However, his opinions on the subjects which emerged from his experiences with the movement such as his concerns for the social issues bound within the notion of modernity had been cast. While his prose style affects a more and more traditional and even scholarly leaning, his attitudes toward social and political subjects remains avant-garde.

Was it really so difficult for Graves to wear Claudius' "spotted coat" as he claims in his poem "To Bring the Dead to Life"? What Graves shows in the short stories written so long after his major historical novels proves that either Graves had a masochistic streak for suffering the past which he raises from "lives of the dead", or he felt a comfort and a security in assuming an identity (much like Argentarius does when he flees to Greece) and writing candidly on the topics of the day which affected him acutely. And most significantly, as will be explored in the next chapter, he chose to write on these subjects from "below" history in the manner praised by Lukács and other Marxist critics as the most successful form for making history relevant to contemporary society.

Chapter Four

The Claudius Novels: Claudius as self-made hero.

Graves' Roman histories, *I, Claudius* (1934), *Claudius the God* (1934) and *Count Belisarius* (1938), while arguably being the works for which he is best known, are exceedingly useful for an analysis of the development of his notion of the hero. The novels were written after *Good-Bye to All That*, through which we have already read his sardonic exposition on the "hero" at the Western Front juxtaposed with the Home Front conception of the heroic combatant ironically championed by "Cook's Tours" of the front lines. Significantly, the Roman novels were penned before he had refined his conception of the heroic figure to that of the Olympian god/hero, Hercules, in *Hercules, My Shipmate!* (1944). In the latter, which will be examined in the sixth chapter, Hercules will be shown as the only logical extension in the developing concept of the archetypal hero for Graves. The figure of Jesus constructed by Graves in *King Jesus* (1946) will be seen to be the most complete failure of the sequence of characters who had the potential to become heroes. But before proceeding to the novels of the 1940s, Graves' Roman histories of the 1930s deserve attention as an important developmental stage *en route* to the Graves' conception of the failure of Jesus.

Where *Good-Bye to All That* establishes what is wrong with hero-making in a paradoxically self-righteous yet nihilistic society, the Roman histories offer criticisms of the failed system of wartime England through the figures of Claudius and Belisarius—but Claudius and Belisarius are historical alternatives who, like the real-life heroes of Graves' autobiography, T. E. Lawrence, Mallory, Sassoon and Graves himself, find themselves both manipulators and victims of the system that they served.

The parallels between events from Graves' *Claudius* novels with those of his life and the social affairs that framed it have been quite extensively commented upon by his numerous critics and biographers, and a rehashing of these issues here will serve little purpose. All three of Graves' biographers spend a considerable number of pages associating figures from Graves' historical novels with those in his life. Such a "who's who" investigation, while interesting to many, is bound to become ensnared in the sort of squabbles that biographer's publishers advertise for book launches, but would do little to advance a scholarly understanding of Graves' Roman novels—novels which are usually praised for their entertainment value and very rarely for their writerly qualities.

Philip Burton, in his paper, "The Values of a Classical Education: Satirical Elements in Robert Graves's *Claudius* Novels", is one of the few who has written on Graves' historical novels from an academic point of view. He argues from the perspective of one who mediates the classicist's belief that a survey of antiquity can provide insights into the affairs of that time and the liberal humanist's view that any preconceptions we might draw from such texts are coloured by issues felt by the reader. Burton reads Graves as a "satirical commentator" on "Britain and Europe in

the mid-1930s" (191). He argues, quite correctly, that "his novels can be read with greater understanding if we approach them with a view both to their literary antecedents, and to their creator's critical preconceptions" (191).

This chapter, then, will begin by discussing some of the critical apparatus commonly associated with modernity that Graves as a sceptic of the high modernist method used in the creation of the *Claudius* novels. It will also examine how he manipulated historical sources for various thematic ends—themes that can be found, clearly stated, in the social survey of Great Britain between the years of 1918 and 1939 that he co-authored with Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-end*.

All too often, in contrast to Burton's approach, ordinarily reliable critics such as Anthony Burgess argue that Graves' historical novels do not deserve the sort of literary analysis afforded to his poetry by confirming Graves' self-assessment of his *Claudius* novels as "pot boilers" and concluding that "[Graves] essayed the novel [*I, Claudius*] not as a novelist but as a needy hack, thus putting himself outside the canons of fictional art" (Bloom, 172). Burgess would simply have the reader treat Graves' historical novels appreciatively for their craftsmanship and story-telling qualities. While there is no doubt that Graves wrote the novels for popular success, their literary-historical value is somewhat more significant than that offered by Burgess' assessment.

Nevertheless, a study of the novels merely for the sake of scholarship can be trying. Katherine Snipes, for example, after spending the majority of the only chapter on the *Claudius* novels in her survey of Graves' prose works in providing her readers with plot summaries, breezily catalogues what she has determined are the principal themes in the novels: power, loyalty and Claudius' uxoriousness. These themes are

obvious and are observed by Snipes in a rather rudimentary way. What she has not bothered to mention though is that the thematic elements of the stories, moral teachings aside, are what bind the narrative. Each bumbling incident that Claudius finds himself involved in is the sort of event that a critic or reader, such as Burgess, can deem enjoyable; and indeed, they are the elements to which the average reader and the popular press are attracted from a purely non-scholarly perspective. However, each of these incidents also contains a moral lesson which builds upon lessons learned through earlier mishaps, and the moral is not limited in its application to the first century A.D.

In this sense, Graves' narrative is operating on the most basic model established by the novelists and satirical poets of the late 17th and 18th centuries, and perhaps even more, in the style of Victorian novelists like Charles Kingsley who vaunted the Romans and Greeks as heroes of a golden age to which contemporary society could only aspire. Graves, however, chose to show the blemishes of the period and where comparisons to today are made, they are usually of the more critical variety and less concerned with glorifying one period over the other.

Popular periodicals that reviewed the works, and mainstream productions such as the BBC's television series, tended to focus on the situational irony of a uxorious male strutting manfully upon the political stage he believed himself to control, while, as is all too obvious to the sniggering reader or viewer, an array of racy women are the true controlling figures in the story. While this is a theme of Graves' work—one which does entertain despite, or for some, because of, its misogynistic overtones—it will be argued here that a more lasting and poignant impression is made by Graves' subtle manipulation of a self-reflexive structural irony that exceeds, in function and

complexity, the type of narrative ordinarily associated with non-literary popular novels. The complex ironical structures in the works make a veiled critique of a world in the midst of events that are, as Graves would later write in the introductory chapter to *The Long Week-end*, "... of a forgettable sort, during the twenty-one-year interval between two great European wars" (7).

The events of the thirties that Graves and Hodge have catalogued were not supposed to have been forgotten out of lack of interest though. In both *The Long Week-end* and the *Claudius* novels the events described by Graves are an all too telling indictment of human beings' penchants for stupidity, cruelty and wanton disregard for life—themes which, naturally, can also be found at the core of *Good-Bye to All That*. Importantly, these themes remain untouched by Graves' expurgations between the 1929 and 1957 editions; they, too, are the cloying substance of his autobiography. The "chaps" might well be forgotten one day, or remembered only in their autobiographically fictionalised form, as Graves reminds us on both the opening page of *Good-Bye* and in its epilogue, but the story will remain.

The structural irony in the *Claudius* novels is, in a sense, a bluff which the implied author, Claudius, is perpetrating upon a projected (from within the novel) audience. In other words, Claudius, is writing to an audience "of some 1900 years hence" (13)—an audience of whom Graves himself is implicitly a part. Graves, through the ironic structures created by this doubly-fictional status creates the rhetorical space within which to manipulate message and meaning. Graves, knowing his audience's awareness of the fictional status of the "autobiography" can suggest, for example, that the implied author is aware of his situation (his malleability at the hands of the women in his life, for example) and presupposes that his readers are able

to recognise what becomes, in a sense, a double-irony: Claudius, playing the fool to his predecessors (thereby surviving the bloody expurgations of their courts), and hiding behind a veil of ignorance (allowing his wives and freedmen to run the empire) while writing of his “autobiography” in the hope that he will manage to save his memory from the slanderous accounts that he knows are bound to be written by historians of the future. Significantly, this desire to preserve a reputation for posterity is also, ostensibly, expressed in the conclusion to *Count Belisarius*. However, this issue will be returned to in the following chapter.

Claudius, unlike Belisarius’ biographer, is not entirely successful in his deception or in salvaging his reputation. In order to convince us that he was actually no fool and therefore fit to rule the empire, his narrative has to give the impression that he deliberately shunned public responsibility in his youth in order to preserve himself. Clearly, to do so requires some degree of design. Hence, the impression that Claudius gives us of himself suddenly being raised (literally on the shoulders of the household guard) to power as an unwilling emperor is not convincing. Claudius needs to have his reader aware of the deception that he is perpetrating and for that, Graves seems to be relying upon his audience’s awareness of how Claudius’ rise to power was recorded in historical sources like Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon who is very negatively disposed toward the emperors derides Claudius’ election to the vacant throne:

When the throne was vacant by the murder of Caligula, the consuls convoked that assembly in the Capitol, condemned the memory of the Caesars, gave the watch-word *liberty* [Gibbon’s emphasis] to the few cohorts who faintly adhered to their standard, and during eight and forty hours acted as the

independent chiefs of a free commonwealth. But while they deliberated, the praetorian guards had resolved. The stupid Claudius, brother of Germanicus, was already in their camp, invested with the Imperial purple, and prepared to support his election by arms. The dream of liberty was at an end; and the senate awoke to all the horrors of inevitable servitude. Deserted by the people, and threatened by a military force, that feeble assembly was compelled to ratify the choice of the praetorians, and to embrace the benefit of an amnesty, which Claudius had the prudence to offer, and the generosity to observe. (41)

Such is the nested structure of these ironies that the reader must commit him or herself to Graves' strategy while recognising that Graves does not "preach" to his reader with an overtly moralistic tone by "ordering" the reader to read Claudius' writing ironically. Rather, there is enough textual evidence present in the text that the reader should accept that Claudius would, ideally, have his audience accept his earnestness and, perhaps, to feel some degree of compassion for him. Unfortunately, it is this very structure which fails him. The purpose of his writing his story for posterity raises the reader's suspicion of the reliability of the narrative. There is no escaping this trap and, it would seem, creating a textual trap for Claudius' story is Graves' intent.

The failure of Claudius' deception is not Graves' failure though. In fact, that Claudius' narrative and the narrator are, to use the term coined by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, unreliable, and therefore suspect, while at the same time so pleadingly authentic and earnest, is one of Graves' marked narrative successes. Graves could not have wanted Claudius' story to be treated too sympathetically.

Claudius, after all, was the emperor of a warring state which, under the pretext of advancing society and protecting its borders, imposed oppressive imperialistic governments on its conquered nations in a manner after which fascistic states in the Europe of the thirties (specifically Mussolini's) modelled theirs.

Indeed, there is every indication that at least some readers and reviewers recognised Graves' satire. In a review of the *Claudius the God*, for *American Mercury*, Laurence Stallings makes the following rather telling observation:

The enjoyable parts of the second volume concern Claudius' lack of concern with his godhead, which is best illustrated by the jesters following his triumphant car after the return from Gaul. It is remarkable that none of the present dictator-gods has followed the Roman custom of permitting the grossest sort of buffoonery to temper the lavishness of certain ceremonies.

The Roman, practical to the last, when in Rome was careful enough to provide a safety valve amidst pomp and circumstance. ... Graves succeeds, as no one else has, I think, in demonstrating that Roman deification of *Führer* was nothing like the serious matter that it is today in the several countries ruled by them. (117)

Claudius' "life and times" mirrors that of the thirties that Hodge and Graves described in a manner which is far too similar to be ignored. Their comments on the politics of the age are dripping with cynicism and irony especially when they are discussing the rhetorical devices and gestures for peace proffered through the supposedly benevolent preachings of the Hitlers, Mussolinis, Mosleys, kings, queens and parliamentarians who, while gesturing for peace, were leading the world toward another global crisis.

In Graves' novel, Claudius' statements regarding his intentions for war are obviously militaristic and aggressive, while at the same time the tone which Claudius employs in describing them could not be more different. In fact, it is amazing how much like the imperialistic and racist rhetoric of the parliamentarians of the thirties who, while desperately trying to maintain the League of Nations and prevent another war with Germany, were, in fact, only serving to antagonise the nation further. The following passage from *Claudius the God* about the Germans reads as though it were a part of the liberal and hypocritical media of the thirties who were trying to preserve a state of peace:

For I had a campaign in mind for Galba to make against the Chatti. It was to be a punitive expedition. I did not propose to enlarge the Empire beyond the natural and obvious frontier of the Rhine, but when the Chatti and the Northern tribesmen, the Istaevonians, failed to respect that frontier, a vigorous assertion of Roman dignity had to be made. My brother Germanicus always used to say that the only way to win the respect of the Germans was to treat them with brutality; and that they were the only nation in the world of whom he would say this. The Spaniards, for example, could be impressed by the courtesy of a conqueror, the French by his riches, the Greeks by his respect for the arts, the Jews by his moral integrity, the Africans by his calm authoritative bearing. But the German, who is impressed by none of these things, must always be struck to the dust, and struck down again as he rises, and struck again as he lies groaning. 'While his wounds still pain him he will respect the hand that dealt them.' (135)

In *The Long Week-end*, Graves writes of the period between the Munich accord and the German invasion of Poland. His tone leaves no room for doubt. His opinion was that the style of diplomacy used against the aggressive and militaristic nations as well the naïve hopes of the English nation were futile and hypocritical. While Germany was, quite obviously arming for war, England tolerated the dictators' threatening noises and carried on with its affairs:

Christmas passed with its turkey and plum puddings and shopping rush, as always. But in January came news of the fall of Barcelona. General Franco's forces had already in April 1938 driven a wedge between Catalonia and the central Republican area of Madrid and Valencia. Now, after a terrific offensive with the aid of strong mechanized forces supplied by Germany and Italy, he burst through and routed the starved Catalan Army. Then began a painful, struggling exodus into France of hundreds of thousands of militiamen and refugees, many of them fighting a continuous rearguard action and all persistently bombed. The French unwillingly admitted them, herding the greater number like animals into insanitary concentration camps, where they were well guarded behind barbed wire by Senegalese troops. Britain recognised Franco Spain at the end of February and a month later Madrid was taken over by a group of Army officers. The Spanish Republican cabinet fled, and Madrid surrendered. Thus ended the Spanish War. The French were doing what they could by a merciless neglect of their uninvited guests to persuade as many of them as possible to throw themselves on Franco's mercy. The shocking story of the Spanish camps in France was not allowed to appear

in the Conservative Press, lest Franco-British amity should be endangered.

(441)

Quite clearly, Graves is suggesting that that particularly English tradition of insularity and carrying on with life despite adversity—or perhaps in spite of adversity—was, in large part, responsible for allowing Hitler and Germany to threaten the stability of the Europe for which Graves had fought in the First World War.

Claudius, perhaps because he believed that the Roman Reich would survive 2000 years, imagined that he was writing to a nation, an empire, that was still fundamentally organised like the one that he had helped to build—one which, as Gibbon complained, was not committed to the idea of republic and which passively observed one emperor after another denigrating a formerly virtuous tradition with ruthless tyranny. Ostensibly, according to Gibbon, modern society was supposed to have been an improvement on the failed Roman Empire. At least, the general warning that Gibbon gives in *The Decline and Fall* is of the marked parallels between the ancient system and the modern world of empire. Clearly, Graves did not think any improvement had been made between Claudius' morally corrupt empire and the present day. Claudius' invocations of the dream for re-establishing the Republic, given his later actions, read as empty rhetoric. The two novels are replete with passages ostensibly written by a republican but framed by warring rhetoric that are clearly as current in the political climate of 1934 as they were in AD 34. Their reoccurrence seems to suggest that Graves wanted his readers be aware of the historical precedent for the troubles of their own day.

A further intertextual parallel exists that needs to be noted in order to understand the ironic structure of the novels. The parallel in the structure of the

Claudius novels to that affected through the dedicatory epilogue to Graves' own autobiography discussed in the previous chapter is clearly demonstrable. Where Graves' epilogue has the effect of renouncing the narrative that proceeded it, Claudius' unreliability, undermines and, effectively, creates a binary mirroring of Claudius' untruths into "truths". In other words, to understand what Graves means, one should consider the opposite of what "Claudius" has written. In addition, the nested ironies through which the novels need to be interpreted in order for them to be properly understood are made manifestly clear through the concluding paragraphs of the other Roman novel to be discussed in this work: *Count Belisarius*. In the latter, the very nature of satire and irony as a form of political rhetoric is brought into question by Graves when he, through his narrator, rejects Procopius' record of Justinian's reign reinforcing Graves' dubious opinion of the accuracy of "historical" recordings. Again, in this work, there are a number of levels of structural irony in operation, which will be discussed at length below.

Snipes makes a very useful comment in her survey of the *Claudius* books. She recognises, in the character of Claudius, a deliberate construction of a tragic figure by Graves. However, she makes the correct conclusion from an inaccurate observation. Snipes considers Claudius' character to be constructed and artificial because, as she claims, "[Graves'] Claudius must not decline, as he probably did in real life, into a rather foolish old age. He must retain the dignity of free choice in his own downfall" (187). There is absolutely no justification in the existing accounts we have from Tacitus and Suetonius of Snipes' belief that, in reality, Claudius descended into an "foolish old age". Indeed, while both Tacitus and Suetonius write rather deridingly of Claudius, neither suggests that he was any weaker a ruler at the end of

his reign than he was at the beginning. Furthermore, while the construction of Claudius' fate as a tragic one is astutely observed by Snipes, her statement lacks a sustained or substantiated inquiry and, significantly, it also lacks an explanation of what the effect of Graves' construction of Claudius' decline might have on the narrative.

Snipes does conclude this interesting section of her study with a rather muted analysis of the mythos of the tragic hero in epic literature which she holds as a possible model that Graves intended to preserve (188):

The tragic hero recognizes evil in the world and makes a commitment to fight that evil. But he commits some grievous error in the process and brings about his own disaster. That error must be wilfully chosen, not just stumbled into.

(187)

But where Snipes seems to have missed Graves' point entirely is that Claudius, just as Argentarius in "Epics are Out of Fashion" discussed in the previous chapter, makes a career of seemingly "stumbling" into things. Claudius' "grievous" error does not occur until the second book, *Claudius the God*, when he commits too much of himself and his imperial authority to his wives, Messalina, and then Agrippina, who, taking advantage of his devotion to them, are, fundamentally, the cause of his "demise".

Strangely, having described Claudius' manipulation by women as a principal theme in the novels, Snipes has not identified that particular character "flaw" as precisely the sort of "stumbled" upon "error" that resists her qualifications for Claudius as a hero in the tragic mode. The principal tragedy of Claudius' life that Graves focuses upon as a theme is that of his fate with women. Claudius' sentimental affections for Messalina and Agrippina blind him to them despite their deceits and treacheries; or, that is the

way that Claudius frames his story. In fact, there is every indication that Claudius was very well aware of his wives' deceptions, but that he wanted history to record his misfortune for a future audience's sympathy.

One of Claudius' first statements in *I, Claudius* is to inform his readers why he has bothered to write his autobiography: "This is a confidential history. But who, it may be asked, are my confidants? My answer is: it is addressed to posterity" (11). Why create a portrait of one's self for posterity if not to erase or override contemporary opinions with which one does not agree? The assumption, or perhaps *presumption*, made in creating a portrait for posterity is that in the future the subject will be known by the self-portrait rather than any image drawn or written by others. Claudius' assumption is that his autobiography will carry more weight in the future, that his version of events will be considered more truthful than a third-party account written from some distance in comparison to his first-hand experience. Claudius counts on this assumption to validate the contradictory accounts he give for events which he knows are being written by imperial chroniclers:

When it is written, I shall treat it with a preservative fluid, seal it in a lead casket, and bury it deep in the ground somewhere for posterity to dig up and read. If my interpretation be correct it will be found again some 1900 years hence. And then, when all other authors of to-day whose works survive will seem to shuffle and stammer, since they have only written for to-day, and guardedly, my story will speak out clearly and boldly. (13)

Claudius' chroniclers are, of course, bound by allegiances to their court of "to-day". As Graves makes clear in "Epics are Out of Fashion", the court might be offended by their writings and a visitation from a surgeon to the writer's bath may be the reward

for his honesty, as it was for Lucan and then Petronius. Hence, those writing for today are bound to write “guardedly”—an assumption which presumably liberates Claudius’ from accounting for his revisionist account and leaves him to talk freely about the events of the period. At least, that is likely to be what Claudius would have his future readers believe.

The discrepancies between “Claudius”’ version of events and the others which have survived these “1900 years” are another primary subject of the novels. Graves’ sources are not a mystery and, in fact, Graves invokes Tacitus as a preface to the opening of *I, Claudius* and discusses Suetonius’ references to Claudius’ writing style in the “Author’s Note” that proceeds both volumes. That some reviewers complain of Graves’ “rewriting” of these well known classical sources seems to ignore the fact that a re-writing was Graves’ primary object. These critics’ responses also ignore the implication that Claudius’ (and through him, also Graves’) opinion is that accounts written for the day cannot be trusted as they are, more often than not, written to satisfy the person(s) in power. In other words, Graves seems to be suggesting, by his rebuttal of Tacitus and Suetonius’ version of events, that they wrote for a specific audience, namely, the court of the ruler whom they were supposed to please. Graves reveals his opinion of contemporary courtly writers in his story “Epics are Out of Fashion” discussed in the previous chapter. They, quite simply, cannot be trusted, especially if their works were published during the lifetime of the emperor who kept their place in court.

The issue of who is an intended audience for a piece of writing is also taken up by Graves in *The Long Week-end*. Throughout the fourth chapter, “Reading Matter”, Graves and Hodge describe and criticise the effect of party affiliations and

political strategies of the various daily and weekly periodicals. The chapter concludes with a rather scathing account of the influence held over the reading public by a breed of “gossip-writers” each of whom was like “... the columnist [who] could not be suppressed. He was the most feared and courted member of Society and was welcomed by head-waiters, masters of ceremonies, seaside mayors, golf-club secretaries and the like as if he were visiting royalty” (58-9). If a writer or a journalist depends upon the favour of his peers and his community for their continued employment then, as Graves and Hodge argue, they cannot be writing truthfully. Implicitly then, Graves is suggesting that during the Roman era, just as in the 1930s, contemporary accounts of people, places and events were not to be trusted.

Too often, Graves’ assimilation and rewriting of Tacitus and Suetonius is misapprehended as either an ignorance or an injustice by critics, though, because Graves tends to write against current opinion. Brey Fogel, for example, in reviewing *I, Claudius* for *Canadian Forum* argues that Graves has

... ‘gone all out’ for the quite unverified scandals related by Tacitus and Suetonius. ... For it is Tiberius who suffers most at the hands of Mr. Graves, and with least justice. It leaves in the reader’s mind a suspicion that Mr.

Graves has sometimes confused the historic with the merely sensational. (195)

But what the critic seems to have forgotten is that Graves’ *Claudius*’ authenticity lies in that he himself is very much a part of the tradition of incumbent emperors deriding the lives and careers of their predecessors—of depending on and being highly aware of the fact that the writers of his court will be pandering to his tastes and whims.

Unsurprisingly then, Graves, in an effort to maintain the genuineness of *Claudius*’ “autobiography”, had *Claudius* perform a character assassination of Tiberius; just as

Tacitus and Suetonius, writing for subsequent emperors, “reported” Claudius’ reign for their emperors in less-than-flattering terms. In any case, Fogel seems to overstate his case against Graves. Tiberius’ reputation in the *Claudius* novels is treated far more softly than it is in either Tacitus or Suetonius where the conclusions to their chapters on Tiberius close with remarkable similarity:

However, until his mother died there was good in Tiberius as well as evil.

Again, as long as he favoured (or feared) Sejanus, the cruelty of Tiberius was detested, but his perversions unrevealed. Then fear vanished, and with it shame. Thereafter he expressed only his own personality—by unrestrained crime and infamy. (Tacitus, 227)

... the hatred of Tiberius grew hotter than ever—his cruelty, it was said, continued even after his death—and when the funeral procession left Misenum, the cry went up: ‘Take him to the amphitheatre at Atella! Give him only a half-burning.’ However, the soldiers carried the corpse on to Rome, where it was cremated with due ceremony. (Suetonius, 151)

Whereas in the *Claudius* books, Tiberius’ cruelty is explored over several chapters as are his many miscarriages of justice; however, over the several pages that catalogue his death, a measure of his good deeds are also catalogued (319-25). In these pages, *Claudius* is offering the possibility that there is no such thing as an absolute: evil or good. Even Caligula’s infamous tenure as emperor has a number of positive outcomes ascribed to it. As a result, Fogel’s review reads as though it is unnecessarily prejudiced against Graves’ representation of Tiberius. Again, Fogel is trying to read Graves’ “history” as an attempt at an objective history. Quite clearly,

this was not Graves' object and Fogel's criticisms are therefore founded upon an untenable premise.

Graves' rhetorical position in relation to the truth of his Claudian account must be recognised if the novels are to be understood at all. Claudius has a clear intent: to defend his memory against the "biographies" which he knows will be written after his death. However, for this very reason, Claudius' voice is not to be taken as authority. Graves can not have intended for his readers to nod in sage agreement with Claudius' version of events. Too often, Claudius' excuses for mistakes, injustices, and politically suspect events read rather lamely in comparison to the other accounts we have of the period. For example, Tacitus and Suetonius chide Claudius' memory when they describe his reputation in the courts:

However, his behaviour in hearing and deciding cases varied unpredictably: sometimes he was wise and prudent, sometimes thoughtless and hasty, sometimes downright foolish and apparently out of his senses. One man had presented himself for jury-service without disclosing that he was exempt, because of the number of his children; Claudius, revising the roster, expunged his name, remarking that he showed an unwholesome liking for the jury-box.

(Suetonius, 194)

But Graves finds "reasonable" excuses for what reads in Tacitus and Suetonius as irrational behaviour:

The magistrate handed me the final lists for my scrutiny with a mark against the names of those whose appeal for exemption had been dismissed. I happened to notice that among the men who had *willingly* presented themselves for jury-service was one whom I knew to be the father of seven

children. Under a law of Augustus's he was exempt for the rest of his life; yet he had not pleaded for exemption or mentioned the size of his family. I told the magistrate: 'Strike this man's name off. He's a father of seven.' He protested: 'But, Caesar, he has made no attempt to excuse himself.' 'Exactly,' I said, 'he wants to be a juryman. Strike him off.' I meant, of course, that the fellow was concealing his immunity from what every honest man considered a very thankless and disagreeable duty and that he therefore was almost certain to have crooked intentions. Crooked jurymen could pick up a lot of money by bribes, for it was commonplace that one interested juryman could sway the opinions of a whole bunch of uninterested ones; and the majority verdict decided a case. (*Claudius the God*, 182)

Clearly, Graves' intent is to allow Claudius the opportunity to clear his name from the vilification that will surely come from the pens of later writers. At the same time, there is no evidence that Graves wanted Claudius to be treated reverentially. Rather, it would be safe to assume that the purpose was to reinstate Claudius to his rightful place as significant a member of the twelve Caesars as Julius, Tiberius and Augustus. Doing so would place him squarely at the centre of the dubious relationship to history and truth that had been established as the norm for the writers and chroniclers of each of the twelve Caesars. In other words, Graves is not interested in clearing Claudius' name for him; rather, he has created a text in which the reader can, with an ironic eye, watch him attempt to do so.

Like so much else in the novels, the "facts" behind Graves' description of Claudius' disastrous affairs with women is supported by the two principal chroniclers of the period, Tacitus and Suetonius. The primary difference between Graves,

Tacitus and Suetonius is narrative point-of-view. Where Graves has written an “autobiography”—a fictional first-person account—the classical historians, Tacitus and Suetonius, adopt an objective, third-person perspective. What emerges from the differing narrative perspectives is the tone by which the authors express Claudius’ plight. In contrast to the version of events that Tacitus and Suetonius give us, Graves’ narrative begs the reader’s sympathy. However, the reader’s sympathy for the character emerges *because* the story is an autobiography and not necessarily because Graves has any particular interest in defending Claudius.

There are few entirely self-effacing autobiographies. Naturally, the autobiographer is concerned, even when denigrating his or her self with, ultimately, providing a defence for past actions. But the question which must be asked is, for whom is the defence being constructed? Effectively, in the autobiographical tradition, the author is also the primary audience: confession, recollection, apology (in both senses of the word) is a means by which to explain life to the author. Whether the autobiography is entirely fictional, invented on the basis of historical detail, or real (assuming, for the moment, that such a thing as an entirely factual autobiography can exist), the subject and primary audience are the same. When the autobiographer speaks of him/her self as “I”, there can be no assurance, even to the speaker that the “I” who is addressing the reader is knowable. In effect, in the process of writing, the autobiographer will invent him or her self, and that invented-self will eventually surprise the writer by the persona that emerges from the text.

Jacques Derrida has written on the relationship of authors and their texts. In his analysis of auto/obiography, his discussion concludes with the following observation:

This [the subject being Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and the concept of eternal reoccurrence] is why so much importance is given to the anniversary and to the midday sun's return upon itself. From this point of view, there is no difference, or no possible distinction if you will, between the letter I write to someone else and the letter I send to myself. The structure is the same.

Within this common structure, there would, of course, be a difference. If I write myself a letter, address it to myself at my address, go put it in the mailbox, then wait for it to come back to me—and plenty of accidents can occur in the meantime—that's not exactly the same thing as when I send a letter to someone else in the everyday sense of the term. But this is a subdifference. The fundamental structure of the dispatch is the same.

(Derrida, 88-9)

That Derrida notes the potential for “accidents” to occur between the writing of, and the receipt of, the “autobiography” is especially significant for the purpose of the discussion here. Clearly, Derrida is pointing out the effect of the selectivity of memory and the impressionistic effect and affect of the process of recollection to the time of inscription. Between such a time as the proverbial letter is written and the time it is sent (the autobiography is begun / the events to be recorded are lived) and the time that the letter arrives through the mailbox (the autobiography is completed), the self who had once written the letter is no longer the same self that has found it posted through his or her mailbox.

Substantially, Claudius seems to be aware of the paradoxically affective process of writing. The concluding paragraphs seem to be Claudius-as-historian's attempts to justify his deification. In other words, Claudius seems to be aware that he

is writing himself into history and that his process of writing is actualising a variant of himself which is different from his actual self. When he realises this, he abruptly stops writing:

My eyes are weary, and my hand shakes so much that I can hardly form the letters. Strange portents have been seen of late. A great comet like that which foretold the death of Julius Caesar has long been blazing in the midnight sky. From Egypt a phoenix has been reported. ... And as if a phoenix and comet were not sufficient marvels, a centaur has been born in Thessaly and brought to me at Rome (by way of Egypt where the Alexandrian doctors first examined it), and I have handled it with my own hands. It only lived a single day, and came to me preserved in honey, but it was an unmistakable centaur, and of the sort which has a horse's body, not the inferior sort which has an ass's body. Phoenix, comet and centaur, a swarm of bees among the standards at the Guards Camp, a pig farrowed with claws like a hawk, and my father's monument struck by lightening! Prodigies enough, soothsayers?

Write no more now, Tiberius Claudius, God of the Britons, write no more. (417-8)

Naturally, Claudius' fears of a posthumous re-evaluation of his career were justified, and Graves juxtaposes Claudius' godly prophecy in the novel with an appendix that quotes at length from Seneca's satirical piece, "The Pumpkinification of Claudius". Basically, Seneca's satire mocks Claudius' arrival in the heavens and makes a farce of his attempts to adopt a serious place amongst the heroes and gods who reside there. Finally, the gods try Claudius then begin to argue over what his eternal fate should be:

Then there was a long argument about the sort of punishment he ought to be awarded. Some said that Sisyphus had been rolling his stone up that hill quite long enough now, and some said that Tantalus ought to be relieved before he died of thirst, and some again said that it was time for a drag to be put on the wheel on which Ixion was perpetually being broken. But Aeacus decided not to let off any of these old hands for fear Claudius might count on getting a similar respite himself some day. Instead, some new sort of punishment had to be instituted: they must think of some utterly senseless task conveying the general idea of a greedy ambition perpetually disappointed. Aeacus finally delivered the sentence, which was that Claudius should rattle dice for ever in a dice-cup with no bottom to it.

So the prisoner began working out his sentence at once, fumbling for the dice as they fell and never getting any further with the game. (438)

Clearly, Claudius' own prophecy of his deification and his somewhat wry remarks on the temple to his god-on-earth status which had been built in Britain as well as the irreverence of Seneca's satire underline the fact that the notion of a god was a highly secular issue in Rome. In fact, in the Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology, the deification of Julius Caesar, Claudius, and Augustus is described as "... the logical consequence of those [honours] which they received during their lifetime. ... Some of the emperors were aware of the irony of these excessive homages. When Vespasian was dying he announced that he felt himself becoming a god" (231).

Snipes, however, who, having committed herself to reading Claudius in a failed tragi-heroic mode reads the novels as coloured by "an old man's futile hindsight" and that "... one must sympathize with the difficulty of Graves' task in

retaining sympathy and admiration for a character who simply unravels at the end” (188). Unreliable as their histories might be, according to both Suetonius and Tacitus, Claudius hardly unravelled at the end of his career. Tacitus writes that, “... Claudius remarked in his cups that it was his destiny first to endure his wives’ misdeeds, and then to punish them” (280), and it was this revelation that accelerated Agrippina’s plan to poison Claudius and to position her son, Nero, as the new head of state. Suetonius corroborates Tacitus’ claim that Claudius was aware of his wife’s ploy by reporting his final tribunal address where “[Claudius] said more than once that he had reached the close of his career; though everyone present cried: ‘The Gods Forbid!’” (212).

If Graves went to the trouble of constructing an artificial persona for Claudius and that constructed-artifice is commentating, satirically, on a period which, to some degree parallels the Europe of the mid-1930s, then we can safely assume that Graves was not, as Burgess claims, writing merely as a needy hack. Nor should we make that mistake of assuming that Claudius is meant to be a tragic-heroic figure in the Romantic or epic mode. Rather, it will be argued here that, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter with regards to his short fiction, Graves is a keen observer of and commentator upon the ills of his contemporary society and that he produces his critique from within the framework of several narrative conventions: the historical, the autobiographical, the satirical and, to some degree, the epic. However, no one of these narrative strategies dominates the text. Rather, Graves blends them in order to justify his interpretation of a known historical figure as a means by which to instruct his contemporaries. Most importantly though, the figure of Claudius that is

represented through the fictional autobiography toys with the conventions of the hero and while Claudius attempts to construct himself as a hero, he is not one.

At the outset of the previous chapter, the difference between Victorian realist texts and modernist stream-of-consciousness works was entertained for the purposes of distinguishing the varied approaches an author can take in dramatising a narrator's mental processes. Essentially, for the purposes of this study, the major differences in a narrator's role in the text is summarised by Georg Lukács in his distinction between texts that satisfy requirements for either materialist or socialist agendas. In the literature of these binary cultural socio-political movements, Lukács finds an opposition between the effect of a novel in which narration is primarily descriptive and that of a novel whose narration is concerned with action:

In Scott, Balzac or Tolstoy we experience events which are inherently significant because of the direct involvement of the characters in the events and because of the general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters' lives. We are the audience to events in which the characters take active part. We ourselves experience these events.

In Flaubert and Zola the characters are merely spectators, more or less interested in the events. As a result, the events themselves become only a tableau for the reader, or, at best, a series of tableaux. We are merely observers. (116)

The effect of the difference in the narrator's role highlights Georg Lukács' concern with the reader's relationship to the events of the novel. In a novel where "objects" are merely described and encountered by characters, little is learned by the reader of the environmental conditioning of the time and the place, or of a character's

motivations. On the other hand, where encounters with “objects” are narrated, the dynamic interplay between a character and his or her world is witnessed and, in fact, is participated in by the reader.

Graves counts upon this level of participation between the reader and the events of the novel. As mentioned above, it is only too clear that Claudius is responding to “contemporary” opinions of himself. As a result, the reader is already involved in the sort of active dialogue between the past and the textual present that Derrida has described in his conception of the autobiographical. However, Claudius also often refers to his prose techniques in an effort to cajole his reader into a complicity with him into a rewriting of history. Even such supposedly “objective” passages as the lengthy history of Herod Agrippa’s adventures in Rome and subsequent assumption of the monarchy over the Jews which begins *Claudius the God* are punctuated by asides which are intended to highlight certain events for future reference and even to convince the reader of the truth of what might seem incredulous events:

He [Herod] called to the boy, ‘Thaumastus, for God’s sake give me a drink of water.’ It was very hot weather for September and, as I told you, there had been hardly any wine to drink for dinner. The boy came forward readily, as if he had been warned for this service; Herod, greatly reassured, put his lips to the pitcher and drank it nearly dry. For it contained wine, not water. He said to the slave: ‘You have earned a prisoner’s gratitude for this drink and I promise you that when I am free again I shall pay you well for it. I shall see that your master, who certainly is not a man to desert his friends, gives you your liberty as soon as he has secured mine, and I shall then employ you in a

position of trust in my household.' Herod was able to keep his promise and Thaumastis eventually became his chief steward. He is still alive at the time I write this, in the service of Herod's son, though Herod himself is dead. (43-4)

In this short extract, Claudius' rhetorical strategy is shown quite clearly. He is not content to leave an anecdote debatable; therefore, he authenticates the event through a source who can verify and corroborate the details.

Additionally, Graves, rather cleverly, takes the opportunity to choose fantastic events which, on the surface, seem to demonstrate Claudius' gullibility but which can be supported historically and shown to, at the very least, be considered factual.

Herod, for example, has his death prophesied in rather amazing circumstances:

Now, while Herod had been standing under the tree, with his head muffled in his cloak because he did not wish the inquisitive prisoners and warders to see his tears, a curious thing had happened. An owl had perched on the branches above his head and dropped dirt on him. It is very rare for an owl to appear in broad daylight, but only the German had noticed the bird's performance; for everyone else was so busy looking at Herod himself.

...

The owl is our totem and gives our nation its name. If you were a Chaucian I should say that the God Mannus had sent this bird as a sign to you that as a result of this imprisonment, which will only be a short one, you will be promoted to a position of the greatest dignity in your own country.

...

The German decided that Herod must be making fun of him and said: 'Do not think, please, that I am saying this in the hope of any reward from you; but

seeing the bird do what it did I felt impelled to congratulate you on the omen. Now, I have one more thing to tell you, because I am a well known augur in my country: when next you see this bird, though it may be in the time of your highest prosperity, and it settles near you and begins to utter cries, then you will know that your days of happiness are over and that the number of those days which still remain for you to live will be no greater than the number of cries that the owl has given. (45-6)

This sequence of events is considered, rather amazingly, as historical fact. The New Testament scholar, Ian Wilson, for example, while writing how easily ordinary men could be deified, comments upon the story of Agrippa's encounter with the German and the owl (*Jesus*, 174). Wilson's account corroborates Graves' almost word for word. Again, it seems that Graves expects his readers to be aware of the scholarly and historical debates that inform his novel. If a reader were not aware of the historical foundations for Claudius' story, the tone and intent of the passage might be entirely misapprehended.

Such historically accountable occasions in the novels highlight the distinction between events that are narrated and events that are described. These distinctions become even more important in novels that are purely fictional than those that are based, at least in part, on "fact" or history. A purely imagined event is not required to mimic or reflect an objective truth—whether that truth is knowable or not is another issue. On the other hand, in a historical novel, even if that work is primarily fictional, some degree of primordial truth exists which has the effect of limiting the action within a knowable framework. Georg Lukács is interested, as he states at the outset of an essay titled "Art and Objective Truth", with "the objectivity of the external

world" (*Writer*, 25) as well as, as is discussed in the previous chapter, with the futility of apprehending anything like objective inner experience. However, Lukács insists that, as such, the objective-external is independent of, and unapprehensible by, the human consciousness except as "a reflection in consciousness of the world that exists independently of consciousness" (25) or, as an awareness, on the part of the author or narrator that while an "objective" world may exist, it necessarily remains outside of his or her experience. As a result, in Lukács' terms, a novel, and Zola's work is one which he refers to, which seeks to describe the external is not as effective in communicating social reality as one in which the narrator's relationship with the external is explored through a description of action. Importantly, Lukács maintains that, for example, Expressionism, as a movement, is a bourgeois intellectual flappery since a subjective arrangement of fragmentary impressions is unrealistic in its representation of a capitalist world that is "a unitary whole, and most visible at precisely those moments of crisis that prompted Bloch [while defending Expressionism] to speak of fragmentation" (Taylor, 13). Nevertheless, as Lukács makes clear in his critique of Expressionism, any attempted movement toward abstraction is necessarily anchored, however tenuously, to the realistic model it is trying not to be. In other words, there is no such thing as pure abstraction and any attempt to invent it is facile.

The futility of pure invention in the face of a knowable reality or an enduring tradition is a concept to which Graves always held a sympathy. In fact, the notion of a heritage which unifies language, myth and historical events is, roughly, the thesis of Graves' *The White Goddess*. In the case of the *Claudius* novels, a manipulation of historical data, rather than a pure invention of it, is precisely the principle around

which Graves orients the ironic structure of the novel. The “real” (that which is accepted by classicists and historians) history is available to any reader who has access to Tacitus or Suetonius. But it is up to each reader to choose the invention that she or he will believe: those of the Latins or that of Graves.

Graves makes certain that his readers know that his fictional author is aware of the sceptical view of history that is held by his audience of “1900 years hence”. Claudius, in several places in the story, but none more clearly than this, reveals to us the process of historical selection that he is involved in: “If I come across two versions of the same episode I choose the one nearest my theme, and you won’t find me grubbing around Etruscan cemeteries in search of any third account which may flatly contradict both—what good would that do?” (*I, Claudius*, 109). Indeed, the similarities between Graves’ historical method and Claudius’ are not to be missed. The closing couplet to Graves’ poem, “The Devil’s Advice to Story-Tellers”, already discussed in chapter three, can be raised here to illustrate the similarities between the method Graves used for the invention of *The White Goddess*, his autobiography and, indeed, for his historical fiction: “Nice contradiction between fact and fact / Will make the whole read human and exact.” For Graves, and his Claudius, it is the self-chosen, the self-satisfying, version of events which can, given the poem’s suggestion to abandon probability for the sake of a good story, and should be used. Historical reality is too tenuous for honest reportage. Therefore, why not use the evidence that is available to make the history satisfying to the author.

Lukács would not deny Graves some degree of leniency despite his rather ahistorical method of historical writing. Lukács believed that the invented, the imagined, has a viable place in the realist novel since

... without chance all narration is dead and abstract. No writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous. On the other hand, in his representation of life he must go beyond crass accident and elevate chance to the inevitable.

(*Writer*, 112)

In a chapter entitled "The Ideology of Modernism" from his work, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Lukács continues his attack on various modernist movements' refusal to engage the subject of the environment which produces their texts. Specifically, he redresses the modernist preoccupation with distancing the subject of a work from concrete meaning. In an incisive passage he writes:

To establish the basic distinction between modernism and that realism which, from Homer to Thomas Mann and Gorky, has assumed change and development to be the proper subject of literature, we must go deeper into the underlying ideological problem. ... I have said that the problem of perspective in literature is directly related to the principle of selection. Let me go further: underlying the problem is a profound ethical complex, reflected in the composition of the work itself. Every human action is based on a presupposition of its inherent meaningfulness, at least to the subject. Absence of meaning makes a mockery of action and reduces art to naturalistic description. (35-6)

Naturally, for a Marxist critic like Georg Lukács, historical perspective and, especially, "selection" are integral to coming to terms with the underlying social function of the text being studied. The American historical philosopher, John Lukács (of no relation to Georg of which I am aware), rather interestingly, writes from a similar perspective when discussing the importance of literature to the historian:

... not only the novelists' description of contemporary scenes but their description of certain fictitious characters and events may serve the historian under certain circumstances—when, for example, these are prototypical representatives of certain contemporary realities. ... If certain statistics are historical documents, so are certain characters composed by the novelist out of imagination as well as of reality—of historical imagination and historical reality. (116-7)

For a historian like John Lukács, what is important is the observation of the process of selection that the historian/novelists makes when writing his or her history. One historical source will naturally be favoured by the author over another depending on the point that she or he is trying to make. David Lodge, in establishing emergent patterns in the scepticism of modernist fiction toward historical writing, offers that because of a recognition of the, at best, plurality of historical writing, modernist writers tended to favour

... the first-person method [which] continues to be favoured by realistic novelists throughout the twentieth century. This might be explained by reference to the collapse of confidence in history in our time—confidence in the onward march of progress, in the possibility of reconciling individual and collective aims, in the responsiveness of public events to private actions: a confidence which made possible the ambitious scope and panoramic method of the classic nineteenth-century novel. Total alienation from history leads to solipsism and, in literary terms, the abandonment of realism. ... a less extreme alienation from history leads to the belief that in an absurd or threatening world what the individual sees and feels is real, is alone real: 'I was there.' A

good deal of modern realistic fiction is founded on that postulate, on that model—imitating not so much historiography as the documentary sources of historiography: the confession, the traveller's log, the deposition, the case history. (*Modes*, 40-1)

Claudius "was there". That Graves chose a pseudo-autobiography to tell Claudius' story is not surprising. Both Suetonius and Tacitus make references to Claudius' writings about personal affairs—writings which no longer exist, that Graves felt entitled to "restore". Furthermore, in choosing to write in the first person, Graves' account of Claudius' life is more authoritative, as Lodge suggests, than if he chose a more distant narrator, as he was to do for *Count Belisarius*. Finally, Graves' writing style is a good imitation of the sources from which he was writing. While the writing is urbane, it is not out of character with the translation of the Latin writers whom readers would be familiar with, thereby lending the novel an added air of authority. The result is a confessional autobiography that through the use of such devices as dates in the margins gives the impression of being a log or a case history: the very model of modern realistic fiction described by Lodge.

The purposes of engaging in the debate between modernist writers and historians and the socialist realist tradition and its more tempered relation, critical realism, which has emerged as the dominant form of realist text this century is because Graves' historical novels fit squarely into this debate and, specifically, his *Claudius* books entertain all the central issues that are waged in the debate. The Claudius novels are written from the first-person perspective; they exhibit an extremely self-conscious awareness of the selectivity of historical narratives, and the

narrator/protagonist of the story is, in a Lukácsian sense, engaged actively, rather than passively, with the subjects and objects that comprise his environment.

I, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus This-that-and-the-other (for I shall not trouble you yet with all my titles), who was once, and not so long ago either, known to my friends and relatives and associates as ‘Claudius the Idiot’, or ‘That Claudius’, or ‘Claudius the Stammerer’, or ‘Clau-Clau-Claudius’, or at best as ‘Poor Uncle Claudius’, am now about to write this strange history of my life; starting from my earliest childhood and continuing year by year until I reach the fateful point of change where, some eight years ago, at the age of fifty-one, I suddenly found myself caught in what I may call the ‘golden predicament’ from which I have never since become disentangled.

(*I, Claudius*, 9)

The famous opening to Graves’ *I, Claudius*, provides the reader with a centralising linguistic turn. The first word immediately informs the reader of the source from which the entire narrative which flows. The word comes from the authenticating source. It comes, apparently, from the narrator-as-absolute-authority. That is, of course, if the novel is read literally without any sense of irony.

Paradoxically, though, while starting the reader squarely at the subject’s centre, the subject himself tells his story from the margins. John Orr, in describing what he calls the “new realist novel” and the absence in that novel form of the fictional subject in the traditional Victorian sense of a narrator clearly distinguishable from the author whose name appears on the work’s cover, writes that “The thrust of the novel is not psychoanalytic, not to search out motive in the deep structure of the unconscious, but to search out the repressed voice of the disprivileged in the deep

structure of society” (16). Ironically, Claudius, though a member of one of the most esteemed and famous families of the Roman Empire, and though various of his relatives assumed the leading positions in Rome and he himself became an emperor and a god, positions himself as a “disprivileged” member of society. He was, as he tells us, nothing but “poor uncle Claudius”. From his relatively insignificant place in the imperial court, Claudius observes and comments upon the history of his time.

Nevertheless, while commenting upon history, Claudius is engaged in a process of selectivity. Graves, after all, could only rewrite Claudius’ story on the basis of existing historical records. And if the novel is self-consciously in the process of rebutting the satirists and historical commentators like Seneca, Suetonius and Tacitus, then the “chosen” segments of history that he discusses are necessarily those against which he can position Claudius’ text. Within a five page section of *Claudius the God* (181-5), Graves manages to reinterpret or “correct” events which Suetonius recorded in terms which rather depreciated the earnestness and humanity of Claudius’ character. The story of Silanus’ fate, Claudius’ reputation as a judge and selector of juries as well as his apparent jealousy are all recast in positive terms.

The scene involving a senator who displayed his great wealth by riding through Rome in an ornate chariot is one example where Graves’ re-writing of Claudius’ reputation has a peculiar effect. Suetonius records the encounter between Claudius and the Senator in no uncertain terms. It is clear that he believed Claudius to be a fool: “Among Claudius’ memorable acts as Censor was the purchase of a beautiful silver chariot, offered for sale in the Sigillarian Street; he then had it hacked to pieces before his eyes!” (196). Graves has Claudius tell his version of the story:

Strangely enough, what shocked them most of all my Imperial misdemeanours was my action in the case of the silver chariot. This is the story. As I happened to pass through the Goldsmiths' Street one day I saw about 500 citizens gathered around a shop. ... This wonderful vehicle was for sale at 100,000 gold pieces. Someone whispered to me that it had been commissioned by a rich senator and already paid for, but that he had asked the goldsmiths to expose it for sale for a few days (at a far higher price than he had actually paid) because he wished publicly to advertise its costliness before taking possession of it. ... In my capacity as Director of Public Morals I had a perfect right to do what I then did. I made the goldsmiths, in my presence, strip off the gold and silver with a hammer and chisel and sell it by weight to the competent Treasury official, whom I sent for, to be melted down into coin. ... It occurred to me that when food was scarce in the City nobody would like to see a jolly senator with a big belly driving about in a silver car with golden axle-ends and lynchpins. A man wouldn't be human if he didn't at least feel a desire to pull out the lynchpins. I still think I did right in this instance.

(Claudius the God, 182-4)

Claudius' justification for such a minor event is exceedingly verbose. Evidently, he was determined to prove his morality and fair-mindedness; however, his first excuse for his actions, that "A car of this weight will damage the public pavements: we must lighten it a bit" (183) gives away the true motive which surely must have been jealousy and pettiness: rather typical of an individual running a dictatorial regime.

Clearly, Graves, is demonstrating the temporality and tentativeness of historical truth. He demonstrates just how easily he is able to put a proverbial "spin"

on a historical record and cast it as a positive rather than a negative event in a historical character's life. Since, as Lukács claimed that the transparency of selectivity reveals the underlying social function of the text in question, we should be able to garner some insight as to what Graves was trying to achieve by this blatant act of historical rewriting. Graves is, effectively, sacrificing "art" for "politics"; something which, as discussed in the previous chapters, he was not willing to do in his poetry. Evidently, he was able to treat his prose differently, certainly more politically. This, in itself, is a powerful personal statement that Graves makes on the function of the art form. Arguably, he is suggesting that the events of a historical novel can be written according to the author's choosing as long as that author has a political objective.

It would seem that the majority of the events which Graves chooses to rewrite are those that sully Claudius' reputation. On the surface, it would appear as though Graves is trying to defend Claudius; however, the ironic overtones of the novels necessarily overturn the apparent intent of the rewritings. In other words, where Graves rewrites Claudius' character into a positive we should actually be seeing through that activity and recognise that Graves actually wants us to perceive Claudius' vanity and desperate need for posthumous fame. The underlying social function of the text then would seem to be purely selfish. Claudius has written the book for himself in order to improve his image of himself for the sake of posterity.

Clearly, such an interpretation hardly makes Claudius an heroic character. However, since he is writing himself into an event-centre from its very margins, he does fit the classical epic mode that Snipes described. Claudius does, indeed, need to

overcome a tremendous catalogue of obstacles, face death on several occasions and transgress what would seem his natural limitations in order to achieve his successes.

By writing from the first person narrative perspective, Graves also puts Claudius into a position of engaging actively with the subject of his era: namely, empire and totalitarianism. Generally speaking, critics read Claudius' statements on his life and affairs literally (which is quite ironic in itself given that most critics are ready to approach the facts of an actual autobiography with a measure of scepticism). The result is that Claudius seems to accept his unfolding fate passively. James Mehoke, for example, in his doctoral dissertation, supports Claudius' often reiterated claim that he was, at heart, a republican but that he could do nothing to bring about a return to Roman republicanism:

... Claudius is one of Rome's benevolent Emperors: a builder rather than a destroyer. But his republicanism is never allowed him; it seems, as Livia is made to say earlier, that a village republic can never be restored to a world empire. (42)

Clearly, Mehoke supports the view that Claudius was nothing but a pawn of the various domineering women in his life; however, if that were the case, then surely one of his wives would have been successful in supplanting Claudius as emperor with one of her sons sooner than it was finally managed by Agrippinilla. Furthermore, Claudius' expansionist policies as well as his improvements to the Ostian harbour and additional aqueducts for Rome, involving potentially treasury-breaking expenditures, all against senate approval, are hardly the actions of a weak leader who allowed himself to be manipulated. Inadvertently, the evidence suggests that Claudius managed his own life and affairs with great foresight which has the effect of

demonstrating that his physical and mental deficiencies were quite clearly affected, or at the very least exaggerated, as a defensive measure against the threatening activities of the imperial court.

Earlier, Lukács was quoted as saying that in the novel every human action presupposes an inherent meaningfulness. Indeed, throughout the Claudius novels, Claudius' actions are ideologically bound by his desire to rise above his perceived limitations. His every gesture is juxtaposed with his apparent lack of wit which has the effect making his rise to power seem that much more heroic and noteworthy. Claudius is single-minded in his pursuit of greatness, and his every action is performed with a future posterity in mind. Though there are a lot of competitors for the position, Claudius is probably the least selfless character in literature outside of Machiavelli's Prince.

Ultimately, what emerges from these novels, which are arguably Graves' most successful of the genre, is a parody framed by a highly intricate ironic narratological structure. Claudius desperately wants to be perceived as a hero, and the singular purpose in his writing an autobiography is to assert what he wants to be known as his justified assent to a godly status. Graves' motivation is the very opposite. Through Claudius' egoism he exposes the malleability of history and historical records. He asserts, as he does in so many of his works on myth, just how carefully a constructed political device the process of myth-making is and how easily a reader can be duped into accepting a clearly falsified historical record.

Count Belisarius is, in intent, the mirror of the *Claudius* books. Belisarius is a figure whose vilified past is resurrected and corrected by a seemingly sycophantic follower. However, as will be argued in the next chapter, Belisarius' image for

posterity, even in the hands of such a seemingly adoring admirer, is susceptible to alterations for entirely selfish and potentially sinister ends.

Chapter Five

Count Belisarius: a hero or a puppet?

Effectively, from the treatment that personal and fictional autobiography are given in *Good-Bye to All That* and the *Claudius* novels, one can conclude that Graves did not write as though the two styles of writing were very different in their intentions. In both works, Graves assumes the role of the story teller. Quite obviously, in *Good-Bye*, the role he assumes is that of a fictionalised version of himself. Graves makes it patently clear, as is discussed in earlier chapters, that the self whom he represents in his autobiography is no longer the figure who is writing the narrative. The actual self is as far removed from the writerly self as, for example, an anonymous tax collector from an obscure age of the Roman empire (see the discussion on “The Tenement, a Vision of Imperial Rome”) is from the twentieth century revenant who has raised him. With a narratological gesture similar to the one he takes in assuming a guise for himself in his autobiography, Graves assumes the role of Claudius, the Roman emperor, and tells the reader his story with no more and no less authority than if he were telling his own.

The premise for both *Good-Bye* and the *Claudius* novels is very similar. In each, Graves seems to be trying to assert an image of the autobiographer whose

opinions are contrary to historical evidence and popular opinion.¹³ In both cases, but especially in the *Claudius* books, the implied author (be it Graves' fictionalisation of himself or the fictionalised Claudius) is attempting to present a glorified image of himself. Given the failure of the implied authors of Graves' own autobiography and his experiment with fictional autobiography in the *Claudius* novels to convince the reader of the truth of the author's version of events, one may ask whether Graves thought it possible for someone to write an autobiography and successfully assert themselves as an heroic figure within it. Graves, as Claudius, tried to make himself into an historical legend and failed. Similarly, Graves' personal failures are acutely described in *Good-Bye* and culminate with him taking his leave of England. The futility in the gestures of both of the "writers" is only too obvious to the reader. Claudius' legend is not preserved inviolably (his intentions are too apparent to his reader), and Graves, despite all attempts to do so, never did manage to rid himself of his Englishness. Both works are polluted by extra-textual evidence which cast an ironic shadow over the stated premises of the respective texts.

Graves' next project involving the historical past involved him turning his hand to historical biography. The result was *Count Belisarius*, written just four years after the *Claudius* books. *Count Belisarius* approaches similar social and historical issues to the *Claudius* works but from a narratologically different and arguably more successful perspective. However, the issue of who emerges from these works as the

¹³ In *Good-Bye*, for example, Blunden and Sassoon as was discussed earlier, took issue with Graves' version of events.

reater hero, Claudius, the historian and administrator, or Belisarius, the warrior and general, is uncertain.

With *Count Belisarius*, Graves is finding his writerly stride in a new form of novel. His historical autobiography was a success, and he was, with the history of Belisarius, turning his hand to biography. His other experiments with historical biography such as *Hercules*, *My Shipmate* and *King Jesus* are arguably more successful because their heroes possess attributes that make them more aware of their historical responsibilities and duties and which are found wanting in Belisarius' character. The historical awareness of the protagonists of the later novels has the effect of juxtaposing the heroes' characteristics against the biographers' prejudices and revealing through the gap that emerges, Graves' own motives for writing the history. *Count Belisarius*, while not as narratologically sophisticated, remains a riveting read and a good illustration of how Graves involves contemporary social, historical and narratological issues in an historical plot.

The narrative point of view remains the same in all of Graves' novels: the first person. The narrator and fictional writer of the text introduces himself, as he does in most of Graves' works of historical fiction, on the first page. In *Count Belisarius*, Eugenius, the narrator, enters the text with a brief précis describing himself and his relationship to the principle players in his story: "I, the author of this Greek work, am a person of little importance, a mere domestic; but I spent nearly my whole life in the service of Antonina, wife to this same Belisarius, and what I write you must credit"

(3). The I-comma-personal pronoun/proper name (i.e. "I, Claudius Nero Germanicus ...") style of introduction is so typical of Graves' narrative style that it can almost be considered a hallmark. Even Graves' Roman short stories begin in the same manner.

However, what else comes through quite clearly through this and most of the other introductions is a self-depreciating gesture which asserts the authority of the author while at the same time playing down his part in the story and his supposed historical significance.

The playing down of the narrator's part in the story is, narratologically speaking, an important gesture by Graves. If his narrator is of lesser importance to the other characters of the text, then his opinions and his subject position are less noticeable. As a result, Graves, as the manipulator of his narrator's voice, is able to gain more freedom to comment upon and criticise historical events than he would if his narrator was a well known and historically significant figure. Additionally, as he wrote to Basil Liddel-Hart, in writing Belisarius' history as a fiction, Graves was in the advantageous position of being able to speculate assertively:

Of course it is dressed up as fiction, and this makes it easier for me in a number of ways: e.g. the introduction of the stirrup, essential for the new type of heavy cavalry, can be attributed to Belisarius without a historian's 'perhaps', and I can give him a boyhood and early manhood, which otherwise he lacks. (*Broken*, 278)

In this particular detail, *Count Belisarius* and the *Claudius* books maintain the same advantage. Since he was writing fiction, Graves did not have to account for his sources and historical "fact" could be blended with poetic speculation. In this sense, Graves maintained the same advantage over the conventional historian in the *Claudius* novels whilst writing the *Belisarius* book. However, Graves also found that there was something to be gained by writing from the perspective of a seemingly dispassionate narrator. Eugenius is, as he tells his reader, "a mere domestic". The

reader, therefore, should not pay much attention as to how Eugenius is writing and should accept his reliability since, clearly, he could have nothing to gain for himself by telling any story other than the one that is true. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, what and how Eugenius writes is of utmost importance to Graves' version of Belisarius' history and to the transmission of the story itself.

Claudius had an obvious reason for writing his history. He was attempting to preserve his image for future generations. Naturally, Graves needed to provide Eugenius, the fictional author of the *Belisarius* novel, with a reason for writing his history if only to maintain an air of historical authenticity for the account. After all, one does not set about writing an history of an historical figure unless there is a reward to be gained from it. Eugenius' reward is the resolution of a personal grudge against Procopius whose *The Secret History* is the principal historical source for Graves' rewriting of the Belisarius legend. Procopius' work serves the same function in *Belisarius* as do Tacitus and Suetonius for the *Claudius* novels. All three become the subject of Graves' commentary upon the process of rewriting and resurrecting history. Effectively, in *Count Belisarius*, Graves demonstrates the effects of the process of the rewriting of history by Eugenius which become, as much as anything else, a subject for the novel. Eugenius, himself a figure "raised from the dead", raises others from the annals of history and breathes life into them anew. However, as always, the raising of the dead is a troublesome issue—an issue which suggests that Graves is afraid that too much of the revenant will be imparted on to the character of a formerly illustrious historical personage.

In his "Preface to *First Edition of Poems*", Matthew Arnold asks why the characters of an "exhausted past" seem so much more attractive to a modern audience

than contemporary historical figures (206). The answer, according to Arnold, lies in the history of characters from the distant past who are often so inculcated with lore that their actions seem god-like (206). Briefly reflecting on Lukács' statements on the function of historical fiction, one can see how the Victorian position typified by Arnold differs from a contemporary left-leaning history-as-science position. Actions, according to a Marxist critic like Lukács, should not be denied their dialectical functions as meaningful gestures that underline cultural and social realities. Actions cannot be idealised or idolised; this would reduce them to the empty flattery of an individual trying to assert his or her historical importance. This issue is very much a concern of Graves', as is demonstrated in all the figures whom Graves resurrects from an historical past. Graves does not regard an historical figure as an immutable, statuesque, form. Instead, figures from the past are, to Graves, malleable and changing according to the mood of their revenant and the historical forces which have shaped both the subject and his or her biographer. At least, this is Graves' point of view while writing his Roman novels. Hercules and Jesus, for historical and mythological reasons which will be examined in the subsequent chapters, become exceptions to this Gravesian rule.

The *Claudius* novels function with an ironic overtone intended to show just how easily a historical personage can be reconstructed from a sketchy and dubious past into a seemingly heroic mould. *Count Belisarius* does the very opposite. In this novel, Graves takes a figure with an artificially vilified past and attempts to resurrect him into what is represented as his original and historically justifiably heroic role. Not only is the posthumous salvation of a victimised Belisarius clearly an objective of the novel, but Belisarius, unlike Claudius, is removed from having any part in the

historical reconstruction of his memory or of his reputation. In an event that Eugenius cites from Belisarius' early days (an event he could not have witnessed but which he must have learned about from Belisarius' servants since Eugenius and Antonina did not encounter Belisarius until much later in his life), he describes how Belisarius renounces materialism and devotes himself entirely to God and to his emperor:

She [Belisarius' mother] bound him by an oath on the Holy Scriptures—she was a Christian of the Orthodox faith—that he would fulfil the baptismal oath sworn on his behalf by his god-parents, both of whom were recently dead.

Belisarius took this oath, renouncing the world, the flesh and the devil. (3)

For Belisarius, his material present and salvation are, from this stage onward, irrelevant. Belisarius' was a life of selfless devotion to his emperor and to God. At least, that is what the implied author of the text would have the reader believe. However, the question of what the implied author hoped to achieve through his writing of the legend and of what were his motivations remain unanswered.

Eugenius' account differs from Procopius' on a number of key issues. These will be discussed further below; however, foremost amongst Eugenius' agendas is an attack on Procopius himself. In many way, Eugenius' redressing of Procopius might be considered the purpose behind his writing of the legend. Both Procopius and Eugenius play a role in Procopius' history. They are also both first-hand witnesses to the events. However, Procopius makes one rather unpleasant reference to Eugenius in *The Secret History*:

... he [Belisarius] at once invited Theodosius to return, and agreed to hand over Macedonia and the boys to his wife. She first cut out the tongues of all

three, we are told, then carved them up into little bits, which she dropped into sacks and threw into the sea without turning a hair, assisted in all this unholy business by one of the menservants called Eugenius, the man who had been instrumental in the monstrous treatment of Silverius. (44)

Graves, naturally, gives Eugenius the opportunity of defending his participation in this event and in *Count Belisarius*, the story is rebutted with a reasonable explanation:

... Macedonia was whipped, branded and confined to a nunnery for the rest of her life. The page-boys were also whipped and branded and sent to work in the silver mines. That my mistress with my help pulled out Macedonia's tongue, cut her in pieces and threw the pieces into the sea is a lie told many years later by the secretary Procopius to discredit her. (297)

Claiming that Macedonia was placed in a nunnery and the page-boys in a silver mine are convenient locations for their permanent "disappearance". In his way, Graves avoids having Eugenius engage a war of facts with Procopius and thereby maintains the principle for the writing of historical fiction alluded to in the poem "The Devil's Advice to Story Tellers" as "nice contradiction between fact and fact". Nevertheless, a tension between the authors of the two histories remains.

Graves, while diverting the reader's attention with the subtext of an invented battle between the two historians, proceeds with his own fictionalisation of Belisarius. This fissure between narratological points of view seems very deliberate. The narrative that Eugenius, the implied author, would have his ideal reader encounter differs greatly from the narrative that is being read by Graves' real reader. Eugenius' objective is personal; Graves' is social and universal. In this sense, Graves' narrative seems to fit precisely in the centre of the debate between those who, in the Marxist

tradition, argue for the function of art versus those who consider art purely decorative or entertaining. Graves wanted the novel to make a social statement. This desire is evidenced through a letter to Basil Liddel-Hart which politely refuses the historian's advice on the military point of view in the story, but does go on to lament the fact that he could not get his help as a "social-history expert" (*Broken*, 278). Clearly, while Graves liked to claim that his historical novels were mere pot boilers written solely to entertain his readers and to earn him money, they were not. *Count Belisarius* certainly entertains; however, the merely entertaining is transcended by an urgent social agenda.

The impact of the social forces being enacted within the novel is irrefutable. Graves chose a subject which was already known amongst the reading public. Belisarius' story had been a subject for history and historical fiction for at least 150 years before Graves decided the story needed correcting and retelling by a contemporary. Along with Gibbon's enormously impressive account of the decline of the Roman empire, biographical narratives like Viscount Mahon's *Life of Belisarius* continued to sell well in England. Indeed, the legend of Belisarius had already been popularised by a particularly rich historical romance written by Marmontel that was first published in English in 1806.

Marmontel's *Belisarius* has little, save for period, to do with the actual history of his life. Instead, in the fashion of a true historical romance, the story is replete with tearful celebrations of Belisarius' goodness, wholesome ethics, heroism and, of course, deep tragedy that serves to prove that Belisarius is a man of the most supreme sense and sensibilities. Marmontel was a member of, as Hugh Honour describes them, "an illustrious group of men of letters—including Grimm, Marmontel,

d'Alembert, Helvétius, Raynal and Morellet" (120) for whom Belisarius was a statuesque representation of the neo-classical ideal. David's painting "Belisarius Receiving Alms (1780-81)" was seen to be representative of "... an historical anecdote" transformed into an essential "... theme of universal significance, a poignant lament for the transience of human glory, the helplessness of age, combined with a meditation on moral heroism in adversity" (Honour, 34). Marmontel's story of Belisarius enthusiastically inscribes the most virtuous sentiments and sensibilities upon Belisarius "anecdotal" frame:

How! Belisarius!—It is Belisarius who now embraces you.—Righteous Heaven! exclaims Gilimer, half wild with astonishment, Belisarius blind, and abandoned in his old age!—Even so, replied Belisarius; and, to shew you the extreme of cruelty, before they turned him adrift to beg his way through the world, his enemies put out his eyes.—Amazement! says Gilimer, in a tone of grief and horror; can it be possible? who were the monsters?—Envious men, replied Belisarius; they impeached me of designs on the crown, when my thoughts were fixed upon my grave. ... Justinian too ordained it; there the wound stuck deeper! (21)

Virtually any passage from any page in the work would suffice to demonstrate the point. Marmontel's work is written to a formula. That formula is one of pure entertainment and emotion wrenching appeal to an ideal. His work, ultimately, is as he has described it in his preface: "I know, and it must not be dissembled, that the fact, upon which the following piece is grounded, may be looked upon rather as a popular opinion, than an historical truth." Graves, on the other hand, was after historical truth. In this sense, he was responding to the eighteenth century image of

Belisarius. Graves did not want to show a statuesque and idealised image of Belisarius. He wanted to tell Belisarius' real story and in the process to emphasise the injustice that was not only done to the Roman general by his emperor but also by the process of history itself.

In the latter regard, Graves was redressing the failings of Gibbon's history as well as the romance novels over which readers were encouraged to lament. Graves' *Count Belisarius* is an account of the same brilliant general that historians and novelists had already written about, but it is stylistically rendered as an historical narrative of the late Roman empire thereby assuming the air of an historical document. Graves' Belisarius, like Marmontel's, seems almost too good to be true. He is upright, loyal, a military genius, virtuous, honest and god-fearing. However, upon closer examination, Graves' modern and personal convictions surface through a subtext, not so much from Belisarius' character, but of the construction of the plot and the narrative structure. The dynamics of the novelistic historicisation of Belisarius' legend effectively serve symbolically in order to explicate the true tragedy of Belisarius' fate—not his personal demise but that of his historical image.

Symbolically, the emergent rift between the purposes of Graves and his narrator provides a commentary upon the indeterminacy of history. Explicatively, the plot and sub-plot seem ideally suited to Graves' personal vision of the church, the Great War, and corrupt government. In this sense, the work can be read as a thematic refinement of *Good-Bye To All That*, which was to have been the work that laid Graves' social angst to rest. However, written eight years later, *Count Belisarius* promotes a subtext illustrating many of the same themes from within the less overtly antagonistic framework of a historical novel.

Graves was first introduced to Belisarius, the historical personage, through a letter from T.E. Lawrence who wrote, “[Belisarius never fought] an unnecessary battle and never [asked] more of his troops than he [was] willing to give himself—either in reconnaissance or in hand-to-hand fighting” (*Difficult*, 167). In order to avoid tainting this unblemished conception, Graves ignored or rewrote several episodes from the life of Belisarius which are readily available from any number of historical sources including Procopius’ *The Secret History* whose purpose, as Procopius indicates in his preface was for “... first recounting the contemptible conduct of Belisarius, and then revealing the equally contemptible conduct of Justinian and Theodora” (39).

Omissions from historical records, especially those which would have been known by a classically educated readership, are clearly intentional and as much a part of the story as any plot-sequence. As many critics have noted, Graves had a strong knowledge of the historical background of both the character and the period when writing *Count Belisarius*. If he omitted events, then, it was in order to convey an image of Belisarius as an unblemished hero. In this sense, his was not so very different from Marmontel’s sickeningly sweet account. That is, if the narrative is read with an absolute degree of sincerity with no sense of the narrative overtones which cast an ironic light upon the events of the story.

Obviously, Graves’ variation on Belisarius’ history has a little more depth and complexity to it than does Marmontel’s; however, Graves was not merely interested in promoting an image of an impeccable hero. Just as with his *Claudius* novels, his concern was also of providing a wider historical commentary and, implicitly, a commentary upon the process of writing a historical novel. Graves allowed himself

the poetic licence to coerce myth into resembling historical fact. He admits, "I was obliged to fill in the gaps of the story with fiction" (iv). A ready example of Graves' manipulation of fact and fiction is the last chapter of *Count Belisarius*, which is based on the legend that Justinian blinded Belisarius in an attempt to contain his growing popularity and limit his potential as a revolutionary leader. The historian, Browning, for example, confirms this myth in his study of Justinian's empire but adds that there is no historical proof for its validity (171).

Thematically, the chapter is focused on the blinding of Belisarius. In the novel, upon hearing of the people's outrage at Justinian's perceived injustice toward Belisarius, Justinian restores Belisarius' social and political status:

The temper of the people was rising and there were disloyal shouts in the streets and demonstrations before the palace. ... Justinian sent hurriedly for his Chamberlain, and ordered that a pardon be drafted; which he signed, restoring to Belisarius all his titles and property. (559)

There is no evidence for Graves' highly symbolic version of the story involving the blinding of Belisarius other than the legend. As Browning makes clear, historical evidence shows that Belisarius was redeemed for less poetic reasons: "At any rate nothing was proved against [Belisarius], and six months later the emperor restored him to favour and to the enjoyment of all his dignities and privileges. [Justinian] had probably never seriously suspected [Belisarius]" (164). However, it must be remembered that Graves is writing as Eugenius and as such he has Eugenius' agenda with Procopius to satisfy.

Graves as a novelist, like Browning as a historian, based his account of Belisarius' life on whatever surviving records existed. These accounts include legend

which sometimes contradict the archival records which remain. The resulting discrepancies allowed Graves to manipulate both character and scene to his own thematic ends, not unlike the historian. Of the readily available sources, Procopius' account, according to G.A. Williamson, a classicist and the translator of *The Secret History*, has nothing of the blinding or of Justinian's treachery. Furthermore, Williamson claims that the story of Belisarius' blinding is purely invented (22) and that the only faults recorded of Belisarius are by Procopius in his "mercilessly denigrating pages" (22). Graves, clearly, chose not to accept Procopius' record and, as will be shown below, offers an explanation within the novel as to why Procopius might have chosen to vilify the historical hero for future generations of readers.

Graves also made use of what he saw as parallels between the late Roman Empire and contemporary European civilisation to comment upon issues relevant to his own day. Graves, for example, expresses his opinion on the Church through his parody of Church services in *Count Belisarius*. This parody mirrors, almost exactly, that which he offers in *Good-Bye to All That*. Graves was not fond of the Anglican Church, nor of any other institutionalised religion. He blatantly expresses this opinion throughout *Good-Bye to All That*. An example is the comic scene in which Graves parades his father to church in a bathchair (1957, 165-7). Graves points out that not only did he not want to be in Church because of his own discomfort with religion, but that he attended only to satisfy his parents' desire to "show off" their battle weary and wounded son.

This passage mirrors the description Graves gives of the grand procession to Saint Sophia's cathedral and the subsequent service in *Count Belisarius* (127-30). In both cases, the pomp and circumstance are the aspects of the religious service which

Graves chooses to accentuate and to mock. Religion, in the societies of both works, is a distant relative of any truly devotional practice. Instead, it has become a social affair which raises and elevates its celebrants in the eyes of society. That this institution became a supporter of one side and a condemner of another during wartime was, to Graves, quite clearly, an example of the highly hypocritical nature of the church as an institution.

The church, as it is represented in *Count Belisarius*, is yet another forum for Graves' social commentary; however, it is also one which alienates Graves from his narrator because of the over-riding influence of a sense of a structural irony. When, for example, "Eugenius" writes on a debate about religion between Belisarius, Antonina and Theodosius on the merits of religion, Eugenius quotes Belisarius' very earnest response to an antagonistic comment from Theodosius: "Belisarius explained, his temper still unruffled: 'Religion is faith, not philosophy. The Ionian Greeks invented philosophy to take the place of religion; and it made a cowardly and deceitful race of them'" (284). Belisarius' speech, of course, reads almost verbatim like Graves' various diatribes against the rise of Aristotelian logic in society and its displacement of matriarchal worship and poetic thinking (see the discussion on the differences between Graves' conception of scientific and poetic logic as discussed in the Introduction). However, what cements the ironic overtone is Eugenius' commentary on the subject. When the debate has settled, Eugenius, in an aside to reader, writes:

I have never forgotten that conversation, and that glance, in the light of my mistress's subsequent relations with Theodosius. This at least is sure: that

Theodosius had allowed himself to be baptized only as an aid to personal advancement, and was no more a Christian than I or my mistress. (284)

The convenient religious practices of Eugenius, Antonina and Theodosius are in stark contrast to Belisarius' devotion. This theme is returned to throughout the novel and underlines an aspect of Belisarius' character that Graves quite clearly admired. In this sense, Belisarius, like Jesus, was ascribed with a patently dogged and singular devotion—an aspect of character that is found wanting in Claudius but which can also be found in that other figure of Graves' historical biographies, Hercules.

Conversely, characters whom Graves chooses to show in a less virtuous light, like Antonina, Belisarius' wife, are shown to have a similar attitude toward the Eucharist as that which Robert Graves represents as morally reprehensible in his autobiography. Antonina takes the sacrament because, ““Against such civilised and sociable Christian functions it would be foolish to bear any grudge,’ ... ‘they are merely a quiet variety of the Theatre performances’” (128-9). Graves' family church going parade in *Good-Bye To All That* definitely qualifies as a “theatre performance” (1957, 165-7), and he presents it in exactly that manner in *Count Belisarius*:

... the singing of the eunuch choirmen is usually listened to with some respect, and nearly everyone joins in the chanting of the General Confession and other prayers; and if the sermon is being preached by an energetic preacher it is often greeted with appreciative clapping and laughter or with earnest hissing (128).

The Church service, then, in both *Belisarius* and *Good-Bye* is represented as a virtually secular event with the “betterment of the soul” being entirely forsaken for the betterment of one's social standing.

Graves is quick to make the distinction between those like Belisarius who have an honest belief in God and those like Justinian who manifest a pagan relationship with Christianity through the possession of holy icons. These two opposing views on faith are juxtaposed throughout *Count Belisarius*. The differences in approach to religion in this novel are important to note. The more divergent the practice of Christianity is between two characters in the novel then the more disparate the personalities of the characters are made to seem. The falsely pious Justinian, who chooses to surround himself with religious gadgets, is far less a Christian than humble Belisarius who is willing to forsake everything for his faith. For all the pomp and circumstance of his false faith, Justinian dies: "Squeaking with terror, the voice of the Father of Lies [ringing] through the Palace rooms, in sinister parody of the Scriptures: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (560).

Another character in *Count Belisarius* who is depicted in a patently unfavourable manner is the eunuch Narses. His religious method is described much like Justinian's: "Narses, by the way, carried about with him, in a gilt shrine, a little glass image of the Virgin Mother of Jesus, which he would consult before undertaking any important step" (379). Belisarius, though, is above the methods of faith healing and godhead worship. He is quiet in his faith and allows his soldiers to practice their own personal religions maintaining a multicultural, polytheistic diversity which is sympathetic to Graves' own vision of faithfulness to a Goddess who appears in many guises, allowing her celebrants to choose their own means and methods for worship. In other words, while Graves abhors the institution of religion of High Anglicanism or of Roman Catholicism, he, like Belisarius, allows for diversity in the practice of worship. In this sense, Graves is using Belisarius just like

Eugenius is. Both “writers”, in effect, are involved in a contest to use Belisarius for their respective thematic ends.

The subject of religion is where the agendas of Graves and his fictional author come apart. Quite clearly, Eugenius would have his reader believe that Belisarius’ devotion to God is a virtue which should be lauded. Eugenius affords a great deal of attention to the one divine artefact that Belisarius treasures: the wooden begging bowl of Saint Bartimaeus. This simple humble bowl inscribed with the words “Poverty and Patience” provides Belisarius with salvation in his time of need (558). Ironically, it is Justinian who first presented this bowl to Belisarius (380). The irony is cemented by having Belisarius’ financial and social redemption begin on the steps of the monastery dedicated to the prophet Job (558). In other words, Belisarius is associated with Job overtly in this scene just in case the reader has not noticed that Belisarius is, metaphorically speaking, a suffering servant. However, unlike Job, Belisarius is suffering not for God but for his emperor. The conclusion, that Belisarius is rewarded for his faithful and authentic devotion, quite clearly, satisfies Eugenius’ agenda which is to show that leading an orthodox religious life is an aspect of Belisarius’ overall sentimental and praiseworthy composition. The ironic overtone which, in effect, functions as Graves’ commentary on Eugenius’ naïve text, tells us otherwise. Belisarius is, clearly, not rewarded by God but by the citizens whom he so selflessly assisted throughout his life.

Graves’ agenda seems fixed upon representing the relationship between the Church and the military as oxymoronic which is, of course, akin to the practice-versus-faith argument in *Good-Bye to All That*. In the latter work, Graves contrasts the actions of the Anglican ministers, who hid well away from the front lines, with the

Roman Catholic priests, who as Graves describes, were willing to discard their crosses and take up dead men's rifles in the trenches (1957, 158). Clearly, this scene demonstrates that Catholic priests representing their church in the trenches were less hypocritical in their behaviour than their Protestant peers. The Catholics, at least, realised that most of the soldiers in the trenches were more concerned with surviving the battle than hurrying to Heaven. This comparison furthers Graves' social commentary against the Anglican Church, which was, at the time, so dominant in British society. Not surprisingly, the theme emerges more clearly in a novel whose subject is warfare than one, like *Claudius*, whose subject matter is predominantly political.

The war had a profound effect on Graves' attitude toward England. Graves and fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon had become thoroughly disillusioned with the Great War within two years of its onset: "We no longer saw the war as one between trade-rivals: its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder" (1957, 202). By the war's end, Graves no longer felt that the war had been justifiable. He felt it had been a war of survival for its participants, and a war of profit for the industrialists—a profit, Graves complained, that was not shared with the veterans who most deserved it: "...unemployment all over the country due to the closing of munitions factories; of ex-service men refused reinstatement in the jobs they had left when war broke out, of market-rigging, lockouts, and abortive strikes" (1957, 236).

Graves relives his anger toward the state for its neglect of the veterans and survivors of the hostilities vicariously through his retelling of Belisarius, whom he presents as an incorruptible character who suffers simply as a result of his loyalty.

Belisarius' only weakness is his inordinate obedience to Antonina and Justinian: family institution and government. Not surprisingly, these are the same enemies of the combatants in Graves' autobiography. In *Good-Bye* the state is shown by Graves' to be neglectful in its duties to its soldiers both in the war and in the post-war years. While the hypocrisy of the rhetoric surrounding the notion of family institutions is represented throughout *Good-Bye* by the many references to his, and others, preference for homosexuality, the frequenting of prostitutes who were billeted just behind the front lines and the like-minded transgressions of women on the home front who conducted affairs with convalescent soldiers and non-combatants. Rhetoric and policy are shown to be in direct contradiction to practice. Having already written one war book describing the breakdown of communication between society and the individual and with the Second World War looming, Graves seemed to want to retell the story, to offer a reminder, a history lesson to his readers that such transgressions must not be allowed to be repeated. Ironically, Graves may also have been chastising himself, or at least asking, publicly, for forgiveness given that he had himself abandoned his family in order to take up with a mistress. This, of course, is an event which is represented only by its absence from *Good-Bye to All That*.

Belisarius' virtues are not limited to faith and family though. Belisarius is also shown to be absolute in his devotion to the state. In this regard, Procopius' *The Secret History* stands in direct opposition to Graves' conclusions and presents a different point of view on the issue of loyalty and treachery. Belisarius, for example, is depicted as being selfish by Procopius. Comparing Graves' description of Belisarius' second campaign in Italy to the one Procopius describes provides startling results. Both Procopius and Graves write that Belisarius undertook the second Italian

campaign with his own funds. The campaign is shown to be successful until the Goths begin their counter-attack and Belisarius begins to run short of money and supplies. There are varying historical perspectives on Belisarius' attempt to save Rome from the Gothic siege. According to Procopius, Belisarius was corrupt:

At the same time he devoted himself heart and soul to the pursuit of wealth and the unlimited acquisition of illicit gain, on the plea that he had not received a penny from the Emperor. In fact, he plundered indiscriminately nearly all the Italians who lived at Ravenna or in Sicily... (62)

This point-of-view seems to demonstrate Procopius' bias against Belisarius; however, some historical perspectives show that Procopius was unnecessarily harsh. Browning, for example, presents a case that shows the General, Bessas, as the extortionist:

"Bessas, the Roman commander, exploited the famine to line his own pocket. Soon there was a strong movement among the starving civilians in favour of surrender to Totila" (125). Whereas Baker, another historian, refuses to put the blame for the famine or the disastrous management of the relief fund on either commander:

"Neither the ingenuity of Belisarius nor the caution of Bessas succeeded in saving Rome" (282). Given that there were discrepancies between historical accounts, Graves was justified in choosing whichever version of the event suited his purpose. Since Procopius' version contains character-damaging evidence (namely accusing Belisarius of practising extortion), it follows that Graves chose to ignore it, and he purports that it was Bessas who was guilty and entirely vindicates Belisarius of any wrong doing:

The veteran Bessas, whom resentment against Justinian's neglect of the Italian situation had soured, was concerned chiefly with enriching himself at the

expense of the citizens ... The only grain remaining was in the military granaries. Bessas sold a little of this at a time at increasingly high prices, more and more adulterated with bran -which was to rob his horses, too.

(*Count*, 486)

He goes on, as though to refute Procopius entirely, to describe Belisarius' extraordinarily unselfish resolve: "If Rome was to be relieved this must be done by Belisarius's own unaided resources, whatever the odds" (490).

Graves extends his claim for Belisarius' virtue by claiming that he would have been successful in saving Rome had it not been for the false news which appealed to his regard for human life:

Must he engage the whole Gothic army by himself? That would be foolhardy to the point of madness. Nevertheless he would have done so, in the hope of aid from Bessas as soon as the galleys drew near to the City; but that, with the port taken, he was cut off from the sea—for Ostia was also held by the enemy, and defeat now would be disaster. (494)

As with the *Claudius* novels, the existence of contradictory historical reports allowed Graves to construct his own themes while maintaining the backing of historical "truth". When one history showed Belisarius with a character flaw, Graves could reach for another that would maintain the soundness of his legend. In this sense, *Count Belisarius* involves a similar writerly practice to the *Claudius* books which should not come as a surprise because it is representative of the historical method that Graves clearly believed in and practised.

Graves' tone toward Justinian's manipulation of Belisarius implies a criticism of the government, or of any institution for that matter, which tries to impose itself

outside its democratic jurisdiction and responsibility. In *Good-Bye To All That*, for example, Graves describes H.G. Wells' sanitised visit to the so-called front lines: "[Wells] had just been taken for a 'Cook's Tour' to France, and staff-conductors had shown him the usual sights that royalty, prominent men of letters, and influential neutrals were allowed to see" (1957, 205). Graves' tone is very resentful. Wells was making money writing about a war in which his only experience was as an observer of an environment sanitised for propaganda purposes. Yet, on the home front, opinions of the war were being founded upon the images of the front propagated by journalists like Wells. Indeed, Wells himself must have recognised this aspect of himself and offered a public chastisement in his partially autobiographical novel, *Mr Britling Sees it Through*. Graves' point, through this allusion though, is that too often those whose opinions cannot be informed enough to matter are listened to and given opportunities to influence events which can have no effect on them personally. They are, in that sense, like an institution blinded by its own righteousness.

According to Graves, Justinian's interference in Belisarius' military campaigns is analogous to a politician infringing on the military's jurisdiction of the battle-front. Baker makes it clear that Narses' arrival in Italy is an extension of Justinian's political will: "The advent of Narses meant that Justinian was angry, and intended to have his own policy maintained" (179). However, Graves implies that Narses was a weak leader and that he was actually responding to Theodora's will rather than Justinian's. The psychological overtones of a castrated figure pandering to a maternal figure and secretly scheming against the patriarch are fascinating and reveal just how Graves was interpreting this particular historical period. There are numerous gibes against Narses' sycophancy and the domination of his will by the

npress—indicating that his repressed desires were quite obviously apparent to everyone—such as the one offered by Antonina when a strategic blunder by Narses jeopardised a military campaign: ““Her Resplendency the Empress Theodora will give you a whipping for this day’s work when you return, eunuch—if you are lucky enough to return”” (376).

Graves exploits the stereotype of a eunuch as emasculated and, therefore, inferior to the male to his thematic advantage. Narses was sent to Italy as Justinian’s representative. Narses, though he might want to assert himself as a vigorous leader and campaigner is no longer a man. The irony is that war is represented as an exclusively masculine domain. An emasculated Narses attempting to function as a leader in a man’s world is represented in the novel as being potentially catastrophic. The stereotype dictates that he has no will of his own and that he, therefore, functions as a mere appendage of Justinian’s masculinity. Indeed, Narses’ behaviour can be paralleled with the theories on the Oedipus complex and the emasculating fear of castration in the Freudian sense.

In his essay, “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes”, Freud writes:

I have shown elsewhere how the Oedipus attitude in little boys belongs to the phallic phase, and how its destruction is brought about by the fear of castration—that is, by narcissistic interest in their genitals. The matter is made more difficult to grasp by the complicating circumstance that even in boys the Oedipus complex has a double orientation, active and passive, in accordance with their bisexual constitution; a boy also wants to take his

mother's place as the love-object of his *father*—a fact which we describe as the feminine attitude [Freud's emphasise]. (*Essentials*, 403-4)

Narses' character is realised as a pre-ordained and Oedipal self-fulfilling prophecy. He is active in that his feminised-self seems determined to overcome its inferiority to the very masculine Belisarius. His passivity is represented by his subservient genuflections to the power of Justinian and Theodora—but most especially, to Theodora which seems a rather obvious sublimation of his desire to be truly masculine projected upon the most unobtainable female/mother in the empire.

Rather interestingly, there is absolutely no mention of Narses' part in any of Belisarius' campaigns in Procopius. In fact, in his introduction to *The Secret History*, the translator, G.A. Williamson, merely mentions that Narses was sent to replace Belisarius on the Italian campaign after Belisarius trustworthiness had been maliciously discredited (21). Since *The Secret History* is Graves' primary source, the principal text against which Graves sets his own, it is possible to read Eugenius' vitriol against Narses as neurotically or psychotically driven invective.

Indeed, in *The Psychoses*, Lacan does conclude that a narcissistic obsession with the male member in light of the fear of castration leads to a "... regression of libido, with this withdrawal from objects ending in a disobjectualization" (104). And he continues by explaining that "... the desire that is to be recognized in delusion is situated on a completely different level from the desire that has to make itself recognized in neurosis" (104). In other words, neurosis can and does seem to be expressed through legible activity (in this case, psychosis or neurosis); however, the activity remains in the symbolic order. Eugenius, desperately wanting to glorify Belisarius' greatness as a projection of his own masculinity, chooses, perhaps latently

and perhaps overtly, another eunuch upon whom he can place the blame for Belisarius' failures.

In this sense, the reader is witnessing a struggle for control over the progress and development of the text between Graves and his narrator. Who is really in control does not become clear until the end of the novel. Where Graves expresses his frustration with non-combatants attempting to lead an army in *Good-Bye To All That* a parallel can be drawn to align him with Eugenius' own preference for the masculine Belisarius over the emasculated Narses. Eugenius is equally despondent in *Count Belisarius* while discussing the character of Narses, whom he takes many opportunities to put down: "Belisarius wrote to the Emperor, acquainting him dryly with Narses's 'loyal scruples' against deferring to his military judgement..." (377). And again when he writes, "Indeed, when the news reached [Narses] at Rimini he was so overcome with jealousy that for days..." (379). And finally, "The irony of it was that Narses was really responsible for the fall of Urbino—and moreover never knew!" (380). Graves could not be more clear with this narratological ambiguity. Eugenius questions Narses' military judgement, his jealousy, and his lack of accountability. This clearly expresses, putting aside the subtextual issues dealing with psychology and masculinity, Graves' opinion that a general must be a soldier, not a statesman.

However, it is in the concluding chapter that the narratological rift between the author and his narrator is resolved. An apparent and over-riding irony in Graves' technique emerges in the closing pages of *Count Belisarius* when Graves reveals the process involved in the creation of his own novel by explaining (what his narrator perceived to be) Procopius' bitterness toward Belisarius: "Sometimes [Procopius] told the truth, sometimes he distorted the facts, sometimes he lied—according to his

vindictive purposes" (*Count*, 546). The process through which Graves parallels Eugenius with Procopius is purely textual. The motivation for Eugenius, as the implied author of the text, for writing the text is equal in its vindictiveness to Procopius'. While Procopius is portrayed in the novel as a calculated manipulator with "vindictive purpose", Graves contrasts his "vindictive purposefulness" with the narrator's voice which is portrayed as honest and virtuous. But Graves' fictional narrator was nothing but a tool for him through which he could address the problem with Procopius and his contemporaries and how they have (mis)represented the fate of Belisarius for whom it is quite clear that Graves felt a soldierly sympathy—a misrepresentation that Graves wanted to see corrected through the apparently vengeful and misguided purposes of his narrator.

On one level, Graves' *Belisarius* novel bears on the reader's sympathy through the narrator's sincerity. As a character in Graves' novel, Eugenius does not stand to gain from being "untruthful". Such parallels between Eugenius in *Count Belisarius* and Graves' other narrators are unmistakable. In presenting himself to the reader, the narrator describes himself as, "a person of little importance, a mere domestic" (3)—a narratological attitude toward the text which Graves, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, was well practised at using. The narrator's criticism of Procopius amplifies Belisarius' tragedy since, according to Eugenius, Belisarius was not only treated cruelly in life, but also in remembrance. Through this subtle subtext, Graves continues his attack on the society which he shows to have been "turn-coatish" in *Good-Bye to All That* and grossly hypocritical in the *Claudius* works. On another level, the representation of Belisarius, stripped of rank and status, blinded and left to beg for coppers with St. Bartimaeus' wooden bowl in front of the monastery

dedicated to "Job the Prophet" (557-9) draws the reader's empathy at a most primary level: like the appeal to the reader's sensibilities so obviously practised in the historical romance.

Ultimately, Belisarius emerges from the text less a hero than a victim. If Graves' purpose was indeed to assert, or reassert, Belisarius' heroic stature, he failed. Belisarius, like the writers whom Graves criticised, lacked any sense of historical awareness (the quality which Claudius most clearly possesses and uses to advance himself beyond his limited capabilities). Graves accomplishes his feat of turning someone whom had traditionally been represented as an hero into a virtuous though somewhat hapless victim through a remarkably subtle and clever manipulation of narrative technique. He has, in effect, undermined his own authorial authority in the text in the closing pages by exposing the neurotic mask that was worn by his narrator, Eugenius. Whom does the reader have left to rely upon then? The narrator has a clear objective for writing Belisarius' story. So too, implicitly, does the writer who is controlling the implied author's pen. Neither "writer", in this sense is to be trusted. A complete lack of a reliable author is, paradoxically, the only certainty which remains for the reader.

However, the certainty of an unreliable narrative seems to be Graves' point for the novel. Belisarius is a loyal and devoted servant. He knows how to lead a campaign, and he knows how to win it. However, he is not a politician. Graves seems to be suggesting that had Belisarius been more historically and politically minded, he may have been more successful in his life. Furthermore, Belisarius, as Graves represents him, did not manage his life with his posterity in mind in the way

that Claudius did. As a result, Belisarius in history, just like Belisarius in life remains open for manipulation, utterly without closure.

Belisarius' life, as Graves demonstrates, is a text which remains as plural and ambiguous as the legend upon which it is based. He can be, as Graves has shown, any writer's puppet and that is Belisarius' greatest historical failure. Hercules, on the other hand, as will be discussed in the next chapter, has an entirely different historical problem facing him. Hercules, in Graves' novel and mythography, emerges as a figure who has a proscribed history which he has to satisfy in order to maintain his titular position. Unlike Belisarius and Claudius, Hercules cannot manipulate his image to an historical end. His end is prescribed, entirely immutable, and it is instead, Hercules who must bend to suit a grand historical purpose.

Chapter Six

Consciousness of Narrative Consciousness: A Study of Graves' Characterisation of Hercules.

Elsewhere in this study, it has been asserted that historical, mythological and biblical allusions are central to Graves' works. It was considered that as a mythographer, Graves often had a reading of a legend or a myth which went counter to "conventional" notions of classical, theological and historical records. Furthermore, the point was made that Graves' belief in, and understanding of, what is meant by mythography and what is a mythographer's task, in large part, has a bearing on the mythographical methodology which he employed. The outcomes of his efforts include, as is discussed in the previous chapters, works of fiction, scholarship and poetry. Graves' attitude toward the process of writing myth and history has also been shown to be represented by the ironic relationship of his implied authors and narrators to the text. These ideas need to be considered when reading any of Graves' works but perhaps especially when addressing the issue of Graves' characterisation of Hercules in relation to his conception of myth in general.

Demonstrably, Graves' mythographical practices covered a variety of subjects and approaches. Not only was he a compiler of myths, he was also, in the plastic-

arts' sense of the term, a manipulator of those myths. He considered his mythographical duties to include not only collating, organising and adjusting myths into an order but then, through exegetical emendations, moulding them into a form which represented, to him, the "true" nature of those myths. The legends of Hercules and Jason of the Argonauts discussed below serve as fictional exemplars of a method developed for and deployed in his classical/mythological scholarship. In *Hercules, My Shipmate*, he takes the work he had completed as a translator and compiler of myth for *The Greek Myths* and uses the sources he found there to inform a radical rereading of a well-known legend.

To judge Graves' works upon his deviant interpretations of myths and legends, such as that of the Golden Fleece, and base that judgement on traditional and accepted scholarly readings, can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. A conscious and deliberate effort must be made by the critic in order to establish the purpose for Graves' manipulation of history and myth if any measure of Graves' goals for these works are to be established. In this circumstance, a measured application of the Geneva School's phenomenological methodology described in the introduction will be helpful as a tool with which to complete the task of bringing to light the discrete mythic moments catalogued by Graves in a variety of texts which he then re-assembled in the novel.

Specifically, this chapter will deal with Graves' characterisation of Hercules and will try to fix Graves' reading and application of the Hercules legend as a model for the method of his "rectification" of other familiar legends discussed elsewhere in this work.

Graves wrote a number of works with greater or lesser references to the legend of Hercules. For example, Hercules is a consistent reference throughout Graves' *The White Goddess* and also plays an extremely significant role within his *The Greek Myths* where virtually the entirety of the second volume is focused upon aspects of his legend. In the introduction to the latter work, Graves goes some way to explaining how he understands the myth of the legend of Hercules:

The lives of such characters as Heracles, Daedalus, Teiresias, and Phineus span several generations [of myths], because these are titles rather than names of particular heroes. Yet myths, though difficult to reconcile with chronology, are always practical: they insist on some point of tradition, however distorted that meaning may have become in the telling. (20)

Clearly, Graves considers Hercules the archetypal hero. He has all the attributes necessary to capture the popular imagination: strength and valour, a sense of justice, being wronged by the fates and yet persisting in his quest in order to achieve his rightful destiny.

However, in Graves' depiction of his story, Hercules is represented as a failure in direct contrast to the conventional image of Hercules as an hero or a champion. Graves' Hercules falls victim to a woman, a fate common enough in literature that deals with the fall of "great men". However, Hercules' fate in her hands, as will be explored below, is not so much destined, as it is ordained. Like any hero of a true Gravesian myth, Hercules must satisfy the patterns of myth in the ritual sense and that, in Graves' terms, means that he must be sacrificed when his tenure as a "tribal king" is exhausted. In the case of Hercules, that is when his labours have been performed and his mythic duties are complete.

Graves does not make Hercules fit his notion of the birth-death-devouring cycle of the poet/king too literally, that would mean sacrificing the story and compromising his rereading of the myth on the basis of his work's violation of classical and historical premises; nevertheless, there seems an element of the pre-ordained and mono-mythological to Graves' Hercules. In other words, if the Hercules of the Argonaut saga is, truly, a manifestation of the recurring legend then there are certain rules and patterns which his legend must satisfy. In his Historical Appendix to the novel, Graves writes:

The nominal rolls of the Argo's crew given by Apollonius, Hyginus, Apollodorus, Valerius Flaccus, and Tzetzes are irreconcilable, and still more names occur in other authors besides these. This diversity of detail is typical of the whole corpus of Argonautic legend and justifies me in choosing for my own account whatever version of any incident makes the best sense, and even occasionally in improvising where a gap cannot be bridged by existent materials.

...

I was at first not sure whether to include Hercules among the Argonauts. Some of the more venerable legends connect him with Theseus and even with the times before Theseus. Yet perhaps there were two, three or even more champions named Hercules—and indeed the Pythoness of Delphi is said to have told Hercules of Tiryns, when he came to consult her, that this was not the first visit by a man of his name. The Tirynthian Hercules, who is generally agreed to have been the last and most glorious of these champions, can be plausibly dated to the Argonautic age ... (448-53)

Graves seems to argue that a mythic pattern existed. That pattern was known by anyone with an historical awareness. That pattern could be read, analysed and then fulfilled by someone wishing to assume the status of an Hercules. However, since the death of the hero, or at the very least his retirement, must come at the completion of his mythic duties, there is an overwhelming sense of tragedy in the Herculean narrative. The member of the community who takes upon himself the responsibility of becoming "Hercules" knows that his status is, if he is successful, at best temporary.

Hercules, in this sense, emerges in Graves' *The White Goddess* as a pre written-history legend. He is a part of an oral prose-epic and, in fact, a titular hero. According to Graves, every community had their own "Hercules". The Hercules story that Graves tells in the pages of *Hercules, My Shipmate*, as will be explored below, is, to Graves, only part of a continuing and evolving representation of a nuclear myth—a myth that not only binds disparate societies but offers a unified vision through which to negotiate a varying world.

Hercules' legend creates a narratological problem though. How does Graves rewrite a pluralistic legend into a singularity? Quite simply, by re-framing the narrative in a historical context in which it is not usually represented. As he writes in his historical appendix to *Hercules, My Shipmate*, it is from writing the Argonaut saga that Graves' ideas for *The White Goddess* were concretised:

It is not difficult to see why the original meaning of the Golden Fleece became a mystery to Greeks of the Classical age, granted that the seizure of the Fleece was an episode in a religious conflict between the supporters of the matriarchal Moon Goddess of the "Pelasgians" and those of the patriarchal Thunder God of the Greeks. (458)

Narratologically, these ideas create an interesting situation. Where, for example, Claudius attempted to write himself into history as a legend despite his complete lack of the traditional trappings of the heroic, and the Belisarius legend remained open to interpretation and rewriting simply because Belisarius refused to conduct himself in a manner which would have guaranteed his historically heroic status, Hercules (or all the Herculesees) had their freedom to function limited by the legend that they were supposed to live up to. In the next chapter, I will argue that Jesus is simply another "Hercules"; however, unlike the Hercules of the Argonaut saga, his history is a newer one, and the anthropologist or the historian is, therefore, more readily able to understand how Jesus manipulated the scriptural patterns and prophecies for the Hebrew Messiah.

The mytho-textual patterns and prophecies that Graves' secular and political Jesus manipulated are not unique to the Hebrews. As Graves continues to justify how he understands the function and proper usage of myth in the preface to *The Greek Myths*, he writes:

Despite a sameness of pattern in Greek myths, all detailed interpretations of particular legends are open to question until archaeologists can provide a more exact tabulation of tribal movements in Greece, and their dates. Yet the historical and anthropological approach is the only reasonable one ...

If some myths are baffling at first sight, this is often because the mythographer has accidentally or deliberately misinterpreted a sacred picture or dramatic rite. I have called such a process 'iconotropy', and examples of it can be found in every body of sacred literature which sets the seal upon a

radical reform of beliefs. Greek myth teems with iconotropic instances.

(*Greek Myths*, 20-1)¹⁴

It is upon a recognition of such iconotropic instances that Graves performs and justifies his reworkings of the myths. However, Graves' approach to reworking the myths was not, to him, creative or fanciful (though, through the epigraph to *Hercules, My Shipmate*, he admits to a form of creative selectivity in retelling the story¹⁵) rather, it was pragmatic and verging on the scientific:

A true science of myth should begin with a study of archaeology, history, and comparative religion, not in the psycho-therapist's consulting room. Though the Jungians hold that 'myths are original revelations of the pre-conscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings,' Greek mythology was no more mysterious in content than are modern election cartoons ... (22)

Graves was not alone in these beliefs. He had contemporary supporters for his pragmatic reading of mythology. Lancelot Hogben, for example, in his work *From Cave Painting to Comic Strip: a Kaleidoscope of Human Communication*, leans heavily on the ideas on the function of myth as a communicative model that Graves

¹⁴ "Iconotropy" is a term that Graves used to describe the "... misinterpretation [of] a sacred picture or dramatic right" (*Greek Myths*, 20).

¹⁵ The epigraph reads:

(But as a rule the ancient myths are not found to yield a simple and consistent story, so that nobody need wonder if details of my recension cannot be reconciled with those given by every poet and historian.)

offers through *Hercules, My Shipmate*. In his introductory chapter, Hogben concludes by writing (and then quoting at length from the novel):

If we have the inclination to indulge curiosity about the beginnings of family life in the New Stone Age, our only solid basis for speculation is the new light shed by anthropological scholarship on the legends of antiquity. One contemporary writer has tried to penetrate on our behalf a veil of ignorance through which we can at best see darkly. In a book of moving beauty and imaginative erudition, Robert Graves (*The Golden Fleece* [*Hercules, My Shipmate*]) gives us a lively reconstruction of the mores of an age in which the cult of the Triple Mother Goddess in her three persons as New, Full and Waning Moon was widespread throughout the Mediterranean. (36)

Comments by anthropologists such as Hogben do seem to suggest that, Graves' methods and conclusions were appreciated. Radical though his might have seemed to some of his contemporaries Graves' ideas were not entirely out of line with contemporary trends in modern anthropology.

Generally speaking, from the nineteenth century onward there was a movement toward a rationalisation of ancient myth and an attempt to involve myth and ritual in a reading of modern society. Writers, psychologists and anthropologists like Lang, von Ranke, Jung, Freud, Rivers, Malinowski and Frazer were all involved in rediscovering a lost tradition. Indeed, in substance, someone like André Gide who was favoured by various modernists, and whose own concerns with Greek mythology are often overlooked in place of his other works, was a part of a modern rejuvenation of serious studies of mythology. In her study of Gide and Greek mythology, Helen Watson-Williams writes:

... in France, as elsewhere, 1919 formed the threshold of a renaissance of Greek mythological matter, transformed by the imagination of the twentieth century. ... He [Gide] very properly admitted the strong attraction the myth exercised for him as for others and the way in which the Greek fable answers the need of different ages and of different men. As, indeed, it may answer different needs for the same man. (1)

Clearly, Gide, like the modernists with whom he has strong affinities and is often considered a part, focused on the function of myth to the individual psyche. Gide's work underlines an approach with which Graves could not have agreed. Gide, like Eliot, like Pound, like Yeats, like Frazer and Malinowski were all in pursuit of mythic roots for society, but they were applying their discoveries wrongly according to Graves. Rather than recognising that myths are rewritten in every age upon the same fundamental principles and remaining true to their sources, Graves found that Gide and the others were attempting to ascertain the temporal uniqueness of a mythic moment to the modern age. To Graves, there was nothing new in the "modern" age. It was simply more readily knowable than temporally distant ages.

Significantly for Graves, Hercules serves as an example of a legendary figure who can be used to explore and to exploit a vein of the past in order to enrich an understanding of the present. Hercules, for Graves, transgressed his own individual persona and assumed a multitude of images. For this plurality, if for no other reason, Hercules' heroic stature was representative of human issues. While Graves does refer to Hercules consistently, the substance of his references is inconsistent. In other words, should one compare Graves' Hercules in his various guises one would realise that Graves is using the legend of Hercules rather freely in order to establish certain

features of his myth that lend themselves to his theories on the plurality of the Hercules legend.

We can begin to examine the sources of these variances by looking into the poem, "To Ogmian Hercules", which is the last of Graves' major works on the Hercules legend. This seems a reasonable starting point for a study of his characterisation of a hero whose legend, as Graves' works endeavour to establish, is present in all mythology.

To Ogmian Hercules

Your Labours are performed, your Bye-works too,

Your ashes gently drift from Oeta's peak.

Here is escape then, Hercules, from empire.

Lithe Hebë, youngest of all Goddesses,

Who circles on the Moon's broad threshing-floor

Harboured no jealousy for Megara,

Augë, Hippolytë, Dëianeira,

But grieved for each in turn. You broke all hearts,

Burning too Sun-like for a Grecian bride.

Rest your immortal head on Hebë's lap;

What wars you started let your sons conclude.

Meditate a new Alphabet, heal wounds,

Draw poets to you with long golden chains

But still go armed with club and lion's pelt.

The poem was published in 1968 in the introduction to Graves' *Poems About Love* and is prefaced by Graves with a brief explication on the principles of his theories on man-woman relationships followed by a curious passage which seems to be an apology for his esoteric reading of the myth:

My education has been Classical, and my family tradition Anglo-Irish; so here is an introductory poem addressed to the Celtic Hercules known to the Greek historian Lucian as Ogmian Hercules. The early Irish ollaves, or master-poets, called him Ogma Sun-face. He was their patron, under the Triple Muse-Goddess Brigit, inventor of their sacred Ogham alphabet, and represented as white-haired.

The Ogham alphabet functions on both a figurative and a physical level, much like Hercules himself. It has been found etched on runes and other weather resistant fixtures, but its invention was also attributed to Hercules, who, accordingly, was worshipped as the founder of the alphabet—the most basic and fundamental form of logic:

Celestial Hercules was worshipped both as the undying Sun, and as the continually dying and continually renewed Spirit of the Year—that is, both as a god and a demi-god. This is the type of Hercules whom the Druids worshipped as Ogma Sun-face, the lion-skinned inventor of Letters, god of eloquence, god of healing, god of fertility, god of prophecy; and whom the Greeks worshipped as 'assigner of titles', as ruler of the Zodiac, as president of festivals, as founder of cities, as healer of the sick, as patron of archers and athletes. (*White*, 133)

In other words, Hercules was a practical god. His demi-god status gave him the right for a physical presence on earth—a presence which would allow him to endow humanity with arts and with communication and the basis and the justification (because he was male) for establishing a patriarchal order.

It would seem, from his prefatory remarks to the “iconotropy” of myth in general that he posits in the introduction to *The Greek Myths*, that Graves was attempting to steer his reader toward connections which they might not be willing to accept without first receiving Graves as a classical scholar and then as one who also draws upon lesser-known and sometimes original sources. Given the volume of his writings on the legend from such a variety of points of view, this defensiveness is understandable and, in fact, seems to ask the reader for the time and the effort to be made for a broader reading of Graves’ works. After all, the Hercules whom Graves presents to his readers is very different from that which Disney has recently drawn, and Disney’s image of Hercules is quite clearly based upon the children’s version of the legend.

Just as Procopius’ *The Secret History* was Graves’ primary source for his writing of *Count Belisarius* and Tacitus and Suetonius’ accounts were the primary sources against which Graves developed Claudius’ history of his period, so Graves uses Apollonius’ version of the Argonaut saga as his principal textual and historical foil for the writing of *Hercules, My Shipmate*. In this case, Graves’ Historical Appendix to the novel offers his explanation for his interpretation and implies his usage of Apollonius’ version of the story:

The original version [of Apollonius’ *Argonautica* for which, as Graves claims, he was booted out of Alexandria (458)] has not survived, but its fault can

hardly have been that it was unmelodious or boring. A man who is boring and unmelodious when young never subsequently writes as freshly and prettily as Apollonius did. The likelihood is that Apollonius, relying on the support of the Alexandrian women, had been too frank in his epic about the humiliation of Zeus by the Moon Goddess, and had thus displeased their Zeus worshipping husbands. (459)

What Graves did then, given that there was a lost original, was to replace the missing “frankness” of the historical wrangle between Zeus and Hera which is the basis for the subsequent adventure upon which Jason embarks. Typically, Graves was restoring a story that he felt had been corrupted by emendations.

However, it is not Jason who becomes to the focus of the story but Hercules whom Graves claimed he was not certain he would include. Perhaps his decision was not so difficult. A brief glance at an index of titles of Graves’ works reveals that not only is Hercules the central figure in Graves’ interpretation of the Argonaut legend, but he is also the subject of two major poems, “To Ogmian Hercules” and “Hercules at Nemea”. In these works Hercules becomes the allusionary focus for the themes and images of the poems operate. Hercules also dominates the second volume of *The Greek Myths*, and he has a significant role in Graves’ exploration of the development and the sources of the myths in *The Old Testament* in the work he co-authored with Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Myths*. And finally, Hercules is represented by Graves as the archetypal king, of the birth/death/devouring cycle of the Goddess’ sacred king which he explores in *The White Goddess*. It is interesting to note, in light of this wide variety of texts, that Hercules remained a focal point for Graves’ writing throughout the twenty-four years between the first and the last of these texts. Furthermore, what

becomes especially significant about Hercules' appearance in works of such diverse genres is the consistency with which Graves maintained his presentation.

When his creative works, both the poems and the novels, are given an intertextual examination with the mythographical works as a concordance, a surprising conclusion will come to light: that Graves' Hercules is endowed with an emotional and a psychological dimension for which there is little justification in his scholarly works *until* connections between the works are made. When the connections are established, then Graves' Hercules is revealed to have, according to Graves, suffered not only in the many and accumulated accounts of the myths, but also in his life as a myth. In a sense, the overall portrait of Hercules that emerges from such a survey suggests that Hercules, though doubtlessly a greater legend, effectively is no different from a figure like Belisarius; they are both victims of history and historians.

Typically, Graves' mythographical works establish the sources of a growing and developing legend which he traces from pagan and Celtic traditions through to their classical and biblical variations. These works highlight discrepancies between the historical sources as well as inconsistencies between more contemporary accounts. For example, in *The Hebrew Myths*, Graves parallels the parable of Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac with the Cadmean story of Athamus and Phrixus (176). This connection, according to Graves, aligns Hercules' interlocution (in the Cadmean account) with the appearance of that of the God / angel in the Genesis chronicles (178); however, the key to Graves' quest in this section of the work is revealed when he rhetorically asks for a justification for Abraham's sacrifice. Graves points out that Abraham was not in the process of trying to found a city (which would

have been just cause, according to Graves' reading of the myths, for the ritual sacrifice of a grown-up son) and that he should have been sacrificing his first-born son, Ishmael, rather than Isaac. According to Graves, these oversights are inexcusable and are an appropriation of Hercules' legend for the purposes of a religious movement. It is, as Malinowski writes, the moment where myth "... comes into play when a rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity" (28).

Graves described the "truer"—the unadulterated original—Cadmean source of the Genesis account of Isaac's sacrifice in the same chapter:

Athamas had already grasped the sacrificial knife when Heracles ordered him to desist, crying: 'My Father, Zeus, King of Heaven, loathes human sacrifices!' A golden-fleeced ram, sent by Zeus, then appeared; and Phrixus escaped on its back to the land of Colchis where he prospered. (176)

The principal allusion in this passage from *The White Goddess* is directly connected with the subject which is integral to Graves' development of Hercules. Naturally, the Golden Fleece is the object for which Jason assembles the Argonauts in a quest and is the text in which Graves first deals with Hercules at any length.

More substantially, the connection that Graves makes to Hercules being a source for later biblical legends anticipates his later work. Such a connection between pagan and Hebrew-Christian mythology is dangerous ground. The Cadmean account did not appear until relatively late in the classical period; however, Graves' use of it here as proof of the source of a myth is consistent with his presentation of Hercules in the Argonaut saga as a validating member of Jason's crew, whose presence as a legend amongst the then lesser-knowns was a means by which to "authenticate" the

voyage (an authorising figure similar to a notary's witness of a document or an officer's validation of a heroic effort for the purposes of an award during the First World War.) Secondly, the Genesis and Cadmean stories are prefaced by Graves' reference to the problem of "the ram caught in the thicket" which, of course, was a central puzzle in *The White Goddess* and, by an implication which is later explored in *King Jesus*, of the basis for Jesus' struggle with an existing theology.

In *The White Goddess*, Graves describes the origins of the Hercules legend.

In this quotation, Graves reveals his concern for the existence of adulterated and bowdlerised versions of the Herculean legend:

Hercules first appears in legend as a pastoral sacred king and, perhaps because shepherds welcome the birth of twin lambs, is a twin himself. ... This Hercules is male leader of all orgiastic rites and has twelve archer companions, including his spear-armed twin, who is his tanist or deputy. ...

The Manner of his death can be reconstructed from a variety of legends, folk customs and other religious survivals. [Here Graves gives a detailed description of some of the nuances of the ritual including the mention of materials such as the oak which is used to fuel the funeral pyre] The trunk [of the oak] is then uprooted and split into faggots which are added to the flames. The twelve merry-men rush in a wild figure-of-eight dance around the fires, singing ecstatically and tearing at the flesh with their teeth. The bloody remains are burnt in the fire... His tanist succeeds him and reigns for the remainder of the year, when he is sacrificially killed by a new Hercules. (125-

Graves' reading of the myths, as this passage demonstrates, is a queer blend of interpretation and what might be construed as literalism. Where Graves presents a rational justification for the presence of the twin in the Hercules myth, he also seems to read the ritual sacrifice of the Celtic Hercules quite literally. The question that begs to be answered is "why"?

I believe Graves wanted the connections between his texts to be made. This is clearly demonstrated in *The Hebrew Myths*, for example, where Graves makes exegetical and paginated references to *The White Goddess*; and, for another example, in the preface to *Poems About Love*, which we have looked at already in this chapter, in which he gives a summary account of his influences; however, it is in a reading of his poems and novels that a reader who has experienced these more didactic writings and is in tune with their interdependence that he or she has the opportunity to observe Graves' technique. Indeed, the tanist element of the Hercules legend effectively anticipates Graves' fixation upon the fate of James, the brother of Jesus, in his later work on the biblical legend.

Hercules and the myth of a deputised tanist who replaces the fallen hero and thereby perpetuates the titular position notwithstanding, Graves' intertextuality operates on more than a single theme or issue. For example, Hercules, in the case of the poem "To Ogmian Hercules", is a symbolic figure; his club, his lion's pelt, his golden chains, his funeral pyre are all symbols which carry weight as allusions to the classical variant of the myth. However, the symbols take on added significance and further meaning when they are considered together with Graves' theories on mythology. This significance becomes especially true when one considers that both *The Greek Myths* and *The Hebrew Myths* are written in an exegetical form. The

exegetical annotations offer alternatives to the narratives presented in the body text by introducing authors who contradict Graves' point of view and theories put forward by Graves and his collaborators anticipating potentially variant readings. These works seem designed to operate as a concordance, or handbook, to his fictional narratives. But does any of this serve to reveal Graves' narrative consciousness?

The question is impossible to answer definitively. On the surface, "To Ogmian Hercules" is merely a form of elegy to a Hercules who need-not be any other than the Hercules of the classical tradition. But the title is problematic to such a reading. Why did Graves address the poem to "Ogmian" Hercules when the majority of the poem's imagery clearly alludes to the classical figure? Ogma, according to Peter Berresford Ellis' *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, was

The God of eloquence and literature. A son of the Dagda (the father of all gods). He was skilled in dialects and poetry as well as being a warrior. He was called Ogma Grian-aineach (of the Sunny Countenance) and Ogma Cermiat (of the Honeyed Mouth). He is credited with the invention of the Ogham script. ... (174)

"Ogmia" according to Ellis was the British equivalent to the Irish "Ogma", while "Ogmios" was a Gaulish god and is likely the one Graves was referring to when he referenced Lucian who identified him as "the Celtic Hercules". But all these variations, as is the thesis of Graves' work, contain aspects of a root myth—in the case of twentieth century society, our familiarity is with the classical Hercules who might, paradoxically, appear to be the source of those variations. The paradox becomes especially twisted when one reckons that it is Hollywoodesque images which compose the "standard" from which we base our derivatives.

Through the allusion of the title, the first line of the poem links the Hercules of the classical tradition, who performed his legendary labours (as Hollywood has ingeniously presented them), with the Celtic Hercules who was the inventor of the sacred poetic alphabet of the Celtic poets, or druids, who Graves describes in *The White Goddess*. The “Bye-works”, as Graves informs us in the poem’s preface, are the Celtic Hercules’ invention of the sacred alphabet. More telling though is the draft version of the same preface in the University of Victoria Archive in which Graves circles the “Bye-works” from the poem and adds a marginal note, “originally b-w was alphabet.” “Originally” functions as a logical modifier in this context thereby implying that there are other “Bye-works” attributed to Hercules besides this one—others such as any number of the additional labours which the classical Hercules was forced to perform or had ascribed to him in variations of his own legend. Two of his original ten tasks, for example, were discounted for technical reasons by Eurystheus, his unscrupulous, and lesser, master. His voyage with the Argonauts is another example and the list, explored by Graves in *Hercules, My Shipmate*, goes on. That list, when considered as a catalogue of the myth’s reworkings and addendums, takes on enormous proportions.

In the seemingly innocuous first line of the poem, we begin to be exposed to the multiplicity of meanings inherent in this work. The introduction to the poem tells us that Graves wanted those connections to be made in order for the poem to carry the dominant notion that he wanted to convey to his readers: that Hercules exists in a lineage of myths that make *him* a part of a universal, or nuclear, myth. Indeed, in this regard, Hercules satisfies the role most traditionally associated with him: “More than any other he [Hercules] was the friend and counsellor of men” (Larousse, 192). In

other words, he, like the other mortal heroes, was the mediator between common men and women and the gods. As a result, he becomes the centre of colloquial myth and legend.

Graves' historical novels and mythographical works are also replete with a consciousness of rewritings influenced by a broad blend of not only classical accounts, but also more disparate and "unusual" (to Western sensibilities) myths as well. Furthermore, though the preface to *Poems About Love* warns that, "poetry should not be confused with autobiography" Graves states, in the same paragraph, that "Each of the love poems printed here commemorated a secret occasion and was written solely for whoever inspired it." In reading of "To Ogmian Hercules", this preface cannot help but make the reader wonder what the inspiring occasion might have been; however, what begins to become clear is that there is a justification for associating, in this poem, Graves, soldier and poet, with the figure of Hercules, warrior and poet.

The pathos of the poem is generated by the presentation of Hercules as a victim. The reader is presented with a tired and poorly treated hero whose life's work is done—a hero who can finally afford to "rest [his] immortal head in Hebe's lap." This hero is not unlike Graves' blinded, used and victimised Belisarius or his much maligned Claudius. Graves' circumstances when he wrote his *Belisarius* and *Claudius* novels, desperate for money, feeling hard-done by a society for which he had fought and which was about to enter a new World War, have an effect on his writing of the period and have been discussed elsewhere: these effects are demonstrable through a reading of Graves' subtextual criticism of his contemporary society.

On the other hand, at the time that he was writing "To Ogmian Hercules", Graves was 73 years old and toward the end of his career. Furthermore, as his various biographers have noted, he had been scarred by years of attacks by sometimes unscrupulous critics and less than faithful friends. The final line of the poem then, can be read as a warning to Hercules: "But still go armed with club and lion's pelt." Why the warning? The poem implies that Hercules' immolation on the funeral pyre allowed him to finally escape from "empire". But to which empire is Graves referring? Is this an allusion to his own "good-bye" to the empire for which he had been a warrior and a poet? Or, is it a reference to the literary empire which Graves always seemed to be at odds with—the same empire which ceaselessly appends "bye-works" to Hercules' Curriculum Vitae?

"Empire" can refer to both the literary and the national. On the literal level, the warrior/poet analogy is clear, invoking once again, the image of Graves' first-published poem, "The Poet in the Nursery". On the figurative level, the analogy says a great deal about Graves' sympathies for the myth. These sympathies are seen more clearly when one looks at *The Greek Myths*, for example, where he writes of the various alterations to the Hercules legend—alterations such as those which attempted to fit Hercules' labours to the cycle of the Zodiac:

His twelve Labours, Servius points out, were eventually equated with the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac; although Homer and Hesiod do not say that there were twelve of them, nor does the sequence of the labours correspond with that of the Signs. (103)

Even in death, Hercules' history is a living one which is subject to rewritings and manipulations for socio-political ends. Peter Berresford Ellis writes of the fate of Celtic mythology in his introduction to the *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*:

It has been argued, therefore, that the early Irish legends and tales are a true "window on the Iron Age," uninfluenced by contact with Rome. But due to the fact that the myths were not committed to writing until the early Christian era, when Christianity and its attendant Latin culture had been imported from Rome, the argument is a moot one. Analysis shows that many Christian scribes tended to bowdlerise the pagan vibrancy of the myths and give them a Christian veneer. (1)

The legend of Hercules, as Graves presents it in this context, has suffered, and continues to suffer, a similar fate. Hercules' club and his lion's pelt are necessary tools which Graves begs him to retain in order to defend against new myths being ascribed to his "true" legend. The club is, of course, Hercules' simple weapon and the pelt an invulnerable armour which nothing pointed can penetrate. Unfortunately, for the sake of the purity of his legend, they are mere symbols and as such open for interpretation.

If Hercules is to defend himself against revisionists though, then what place does Graves have offering advice to him when he himself is in the process of revising the Hercules myth? What becomes apparent through the consistency of Graves' representations in the other fictional accounts is his faith in a single vein of the legend and in the accuracy of his rewritings of that myth. In the foreword to the poem cited at the start of this chapter, Graves informs us that he is writing to the "Ogmian Hercules"; yet, as we have seen, the majority of the allusions in the poem are to the

figure of the Greek tradition. It becomes clear, from a broader reading of Graves' works, that the names for Hercules are virtually interchangeable, as they are for Hebë, Megara, Augë, Hippolytë and Dëianeira. It seems, that for Graves, it is the figure's symbolic status which is of value to his self-styled "semiotics" for his "grammar of poetic myth" and not the particulars of the legends which one might argue over having read a Homer or a Lucian.

In the introduction to *The Hebrew Myths*, Graves furthers this last point and aligns himself, at least on this point, with Frazer and Malinowski:

Myths are dramatic stories that form a sacred charter either authorising the continuance of ancient institutions, customs, rites and beliefs in the area where they are current, or approving alterations. (11)

Evidently, Graves was operating upon the later principle; his works are a confirmation for his rewriting and restructuring of myths on the basis that the history of mythology itself approves of the alterations; however, Graves' process is not to invent new myths based on the old, but rather to distil the various myths into a single "true" story which is, of course, that of the White Goddess.

Frazer's *The Golden Bough* was the text that established the "academic" (this word is used very cautiously) principles which allowed Graves to rechart myth by searching for a nucleus to the narratives that had become obscured by centuries of decorative and discursive amendments. However, Graves found the asymptotic limitations to Frazer's work where Frazer demonstrated too much care for his reputation (perhaps because he failed to wear Hercules' pelt or arm himself with his club)—a reputation which he maintained, according to Graves, by:

... carefully and methodically sailing all round his dangerous subject, as if charting the coastline of a forbidden island without actually committing himself to a declaration that it existed. What he was saying-not-saying was that Christian legend, dogma and ritual are the refinement of a great body of primitive and even barbarous beliefs... (242)

This statement reveals an essential strain of Graves' discourse. Graves rebels against the process that refines myth—the process which blanches it of its colour and for which reason he writes his declaration in the introduction to *The White Goddess* that

... [he has] not care to leave out any step in the laborious argument, if only because readers of [his] recent historical novels have grown a little suspicious of unorthodox conclusions for which authorities are not always quoted. (9)

According to Graves, the “authorities” were wrong about the history, meaning and development of myth, and he was right because he had “cared” to take each step in the laborious argument—and each step was taken as a writer, not as a logician. The confidence and assertiveness of his position cannot be avoided in any reading of his mythographical works which can be read, metaphorically speaking, as a cartographer's boundary-markers for the texture of the lands that are Graves' fictional worlds—lands created in his “mental universe”.

Hercules, like Belisarius, is a victim. He was gloriously successful in his lives; however, his legend was never fixed. It was appropriated by a variety of belief-systems and amended in order to suit a given system. In this sense, Hercules never died. Graves resurrects him, breathes a new life into him and, paradoxically, in that process, attempts to restore his origins and thereby finally allows him to rest. The primary difference between Belisarius and Hercules, though, is that Hercules was, as

a living legend, one of a far greater public stature than Belisarius. Jason's shipmates deferred to Hercules' legend throughout the voyage (much to Jason's annoyance (85)) and throughout the novel it seems that Hercules is indeed joining a group of lesser-greats merely for the opportunity of experiencing a spot of adventure.

The novel itself is a spirited recounting of Apollonius' story. Where it differs from the well-known original is in its effort to demystify the meaning of sacred events. Graves, for example, offers a very prudent and practical explanation for why so many Greek legends are sons or daughters of the gods. Graves does not believe that the Olympians actually descended to earth to frolic with their minions, but rather, that each Greek tribe or extended family was associated with a deity to which they were devoted. Since, for example, it was prophesied that Jason and a team of Minyans were to embark on an adventure to recover the lost Fleece, Graves sought a simple and logical explanation for the Minyanisation of heroes from a variety of clans and communities:

Those of the crew who were not Minyans by birth performed a perfunctory ceremony of becoming so by adoption. Each in turn crept out from between the knees of Jason's mother, Alcimede, and then wailed like a new-born infant until comforted by her with a rag-teat dipped in ewes' milk. After this they were solemnly given their own names again and grew to manhood within the hour. (93)

Similarly, throughout the novel, centaurs and other mythical creatures are explained away by Graves as merely being a clan or community of the region, the most remote being the most unusual and inhuman.

However, the binding theme of this novel, just as it is for *King Jesus*, is that of the struggle between the White Goddess and the rising patriarchal religion. Before undertaking the quest, Jason visits Cheiron, his mentor, whom he asks for advice. Cheiron's fear is that if Jason is successful then "... Zeus the Ram will return to this shrine and once more oust our beloved Mother" (54). Jason then volunteers to abandon the voyage but only if the Great Goddess advises Cheiron that he should do so. What follows is a lengthy speech conducted to Cheiron in a dream during which the Goddess approves Jason's voyage claiming that "The Fleece is nothing in itself—a cast garment—and its return to Zeus will serve to recall the humiliation which I once forced him to accept at my hands" (56). However, given that the Prologue (which catalogues the fate of the last surviving Argonaut) is entirely about the transgressions of Jason's crew upon the Goddess' religion and her punishment of the crew for that, her statement is clearly ironic. The Prologue concludes:

Still conversing, she secretly signed to the Goat men that they should take Ancaeus and lead him away from her sight, and then hunt him to death with their slings. For she decided that a man who could relate such disturbing and indecent stories must not be allowed to remain alive on the island ... (13)

Clearly, the subtext of the novel which emerges from the Prologue is that it is the very existence of a narrative which is, in itself, a validation and a justification for a belief system is dangerous. The priestesses fear, as she condemns Ancaeus, is that his story will spread and that the Argo's voyage will become known and its heroes worshipped. She thinks that by killing Ancaeus she will stop the spread of the story. The irony here is cosmic. Despite her earnestness, the reader knows that her religion failed and that that ratified by Jason's Argonauts succeeded hers.

Why then did Graves include Hercules in a story which was supposed to be a vehicle for his assertion of the struggle between matriarchal and patriarchal religions? Clearly, the adventurers whom Hercules joined were merely mortal and hardly of the same calibre as Hercules himself. They may have wanted him to join the crew as a validating member. However, Graves expends more than half of the novel cataloguing and describing Hercules' feats many of which were not even a part of the Argonaut crew's voyage. Indeed, Hercules leaves the crew at a vital point of the voyage and only happens to rejoin them later as a circumstance and a convenience.

It does, indeed, seem as though Hercules was incidental to the mytho-historical aspect of the voyage itself (though without him the Argo might well have failed); however, it was his fame that the narrator of the story seems most willing to celebrate and champion. Graves though, in the concluding chapter gives an account of the demise of each of the Argonauts. Hercules' section is the longest and symbolically the most suggestive:

... the dying Nessus whispered to Deianeira that she should pour some of his blood into a bottle and keep it as a sure charm for preserving a husband's love. This she did, and after used the charm on Hercules when she suspected that he was in love with a girl named Iole; ... The blood was poisonous and ate into his flesh, causing him the most exquisite pain; he tore off the shirt with great lumps of flesh sticking to it and, being ferried over to Trachis, went raging up into Mount Oeta; where he built himself an enormous pyre, and lighted it himself. He lay upon the pyre, roaring for indignation, until his body was utterly consumed.

The soul of Hercules rose high into the air, carried by the flame and smoke, and the South-West Wind bore it to Mount Olympus. (440-1)

When one parallels this version of the end of Hercules with that which Graves ascribes to Moses in his first historical novel *My Head! My Head!*, the parallel is striking. Moses' death remains a mystery in Graves' novel; however, he does speculate that Moses died by climbing to a valley behind Mount Nebo (where he was last seen alive) and then climbing into a grave which he had dug for himself and pulling the stones and the soil over himself with a rigging that he had pre-prepared (123-4). Naturally, when Moses' followers return to find and consult him and find him missing, they inscribe his legend with the story that he was plucked from Nebo's peak by God himself.

In the works which Graves subsequently wrote on Jesus and Hebrew mythology, there is an over-riding impression that Graves felt that myths, even those sacred to his own background and upbringing, were nothing more than variations of each other. Jesus, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, is really nothing much more than a more contemporary Hercules. He is also much more clever and aware of the legend which he has to live through. In fact, the novel posits (and these ideas seem less radical these days with the work performed by later generations of biblical scholars) that Jesus was an ordinary man with a tremendous gift for politics and a belief that the fate in which he purported to believe would provide salvation for man. However, before Jesus can complete his more famous tasks, Graves pits him against a woman who is representative of Graves' White Goddess system for matriarchal devotion and rule. In the novel, it is the outcome of that debate which decides the fate of Jesus.

Hercules, like Belisarius, simply was not aware enough of how history and myth functioned. Unlike Jesus and Claudius, Hercules and Belisarius simply did not take the measured steps that were necessary to safeguard their historical memories. While Graves holds a demonstrable affection for Hercules (the poetry about Hercules serves as a sufficient example), he was destined, despite being the archetypal hero, to be nothing more than a pawn in the historical struggle for two contrary systems of belief and worship: matriarchy and patriarchy. So much can be detected as an object of the novel if, as has been suggested, the reader first undertakes a study of Graves' theories on mythology and applies an intertextual reading of these myths to his history of Hercules and Jason's Argonauts.

Chapter Seven

Jesus Christ: the self-made super star.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. ..." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus. (Matthew, 1.18)

The birth of Jesus, or, at least the description of the birth of Jesus provided by the author of the Gospel according to Matthew, is the first event in a sequence of events that climaxes with Christ's crucifixion. The celebratory story of Christ's life told by Matthew and retold by Mark and Luke form what are known as the synoptic gospels which together the Gospel according to John provide the mythological foundation for Christian belief systems. It is doubtlessly the best known story in Western society.

However, as any close reading of the Bible shows, the birth of Jesus is, paradoxically, the first of a series of disagreements between the Gospels on the origins and events of the life of Jesus.

Given that the history of Jesus is, from the records of the first event of his life, a troublesome text, critics of the church and Biblical revisionists have been able to attack the system of belief for its arguably questionable premises. Graves, like so many other writers and historians, exploits the vagaries of the "Gospel" truth in order to resolve the differences between them and to thereby establish a consistency for the history which positions his own thematic ends for the life of Christ in ascendancy.

Graves' project for the history of Jesus seems largely benevolent. Amongst his many ideas surrounding the legend of Jesus (including Jesus' part in the grand mythological battle between matriarchy and patriarchy), Graves redresses the Christian presupposition that the Jewish race could be held responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. It is not surprising that the historical issue of the supposed Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus found its way into a novel published in 1946. At the close of the European phase of the Second World War, Europe began to realise that centuries of Jewish persecution at the charge of Christian zealots may, in part, have contributed to engendering a political and social climate in which Hitler's "final solution" could flourish. As many Biblical scholars have argued, the foundation of the Christian church and its subsequent ordination as a political organisation in the fourth century by the emperor Constantine, can be shown to be, in large part, responsible for the subsequent condemnation and persecution of the Jewish race by Christians. Granted, long before the popularisation of Christianity, the Romans and Egyptians had had their "Jewish problem"; however, given the subsequent spread of

Christianity and the Christian belief that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, their persecution by Christian followers can be readily, though not comfortably, explained.

Clearly, there are many possible interpretations of the history of Christianity; however, Graves was writing from a tradition of historical scholarship that attempted to upturn, or at least to revise, the predominantly pro-Christian history of the Western world. Invariably, attempts to do so forced historians, like Graves, to question the very basis of the cult that had come to dominate nearly 2000 years of history. These questions included the rather difficult and sensitive issues surrounding the origins of the historical Jesus Christ.

In a mostly secular society, questions of the accuracy of Biblical accounts surrounding the events of the life of Jesus do not really trouble the lay person. Most casual readers of the Bible and occasional church visitors do not trouble themselves with the disagreements between the various Gospel accounts concerning such seemingly fundamental events as Jesus' birth. Most accept the version told by the writer of the Gospel according to Matthew and leave it at that, perhaps because it is told most simply and is the easiest to resolve with the style of faith propagated by Christian worship. Few wonder, for example, why the Mark Gospel gives no account of the birth of Jesus. In fact, while accepting the disagreements, few readers of the Bible seem to question why so many of the Gospel accounts contradict one another.

The extent of the violation of what had formerly seemed fundamental and wholly Christian human rights during the Second World War created a moral crisis in Western society. The near annihilation of the Jewish population during the Nazi regime focused questions on the ethics of propagating a belief in a religion which

seemed to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus. The tacit acceptance of an untried conviction of the Jewish race for the execution of someone whom the Christian religion heralded as the saviour of mankind began to be thought of as something which may have fuelled anti-Semitic sentiments. This feeling, as historians noticed, played a part in a passive encouragement of the holocaust and played a part in Western governmental policies that turned Jewish refugees from central Europe away from ports in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Cuba and the United States.

T.S. Eliot was one of scores of intellectuals who attempted to rationalise devotional practices in anticipation of a faithless time. In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", first published in 1919, Eliot attempts to encourage writing which is historically minded. However, the essay suggests a form of historical writing which is based upon perception and, as such, anticipates the modernist stress on the superiority of a historical view that is subjectively rather than objectively based:

... the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (*Selected Prose*, 23)

No doubt Graves would have agreed with Eliot at this juncture; however, Eliot goes even further in relating the importance of history and specifically religion to literature in his essay entitled "Religion and Literature" where he argues that literary criticism should come from the perspective of ethics and religion. Eliot goes on to show that ethics and religion are indelibly twinned (32). Paralleling religion and ethics in 1934

may have seemed just and even desirable; however, the self-righteousness of Christian ethics as they were preached by those like Eliot proved difficult to practice in the post-War years.

After the Second World War, the Bible, religion and critical approaches to both began to be redressed by social reformers. In an essay reviewing a symposium entitled "Religion and the Intellectuals", Douglas Knight makes the observation that most of the contributors to the proceedings seemed to be skirting the issue of the historical legacy of the Bible. None wanted to acknowledge faith as a guiding principle for accepting the Bible. Instead, all leaned rather liberally toward a debate on the acceptance of Biblical teachings as a moral guide which had lost its place as an ethical guide for the post-war years. Knight's principal criticism of the symposium was that the majority of the speakers considered the questions raised by socialism as a moral guide and railed against the church as an institution of reduced importance. He considers this approach an "historical divisiveness" (612) and a "technique of dismissal [of the historical place of religion]" (612). He concludes on the subject by writing:

... the question of "religion and the intellectuals" vanishes completely to become instead "politics and the intellectuals" or at its broadest "social morality and the intellectuals." Problems of social betterment are encouraged to become the whole of life, and institutions as well as individuals are judged by their attitude to such problems. Of course, one might meet these objections to religion on their own grounds, and say that the political statements of a group like the World Council of Churches in 1948 are as "progressive" politically as one could ask. But the real issue is not dealt with in this way,

because religious faith includes areas of experience which have relatively little to do with social action of the ordinary sort. It is quite possible that it has to do above all with the range of values by which one lives rather than with the particular program he is to follow, possible that its structures are of a complexity which does not lend itself to any simple and abstract pattern of social action. It would then be a legitimate source of resentment for someone like Mr. Schapiro [who, as Knight argues "holds his belief despite his disillusion" with the church (613)] that the Church was not devoting its primary energies to the kind of reform he was most interested in. But such resentment hardly justifies the statement that the Church has failed because it does not share his interests. Nor does it justify the assumption that if socialism only worked as it should there would be no function for religion in society. (613)

Knight's objection to the development of the debate is clear. Historical foundations, even of the subjective variety described by Eliot, were entirely missing from the proceedings. Knight, through his critique of the symposium, seems to be suggesting that a marriage of state and church is possible if the historically symbiotic relationship between the two is acknowledged by reformers. The Church could not, and would not, have existed without the state in the first place. Christianity, for example, was merely a cult until Constantine formalised it as an institution in order to consolidate his empire. Similarly, Judaism is inextricably linked to the politics of the Middle East. The Jewish heads of the Galilean Tetrachy in the days of Jesus were uncomfortable comrades with Pontius Pilate and the supervisory Roman council. Such historical and political overtones that came to alter the form of faith must,

according to Knight, be acknowledged. Graves' history of Jesus, as will be discussed in this chapter, involves just such a mingling of myth, faith and politics setting it squarely in the religious and political ferment of the post-war years.

In another paper of the same issue of *The Sewanee Review*, Charles Harrison reviews what he terms a "post-critical guide to the Bible". By "post-criticism", Harrison is referring to the approach adopted by the author of a *Reader's Guide to the Bible* which "broadly acknowledge[s] the force of critical conclusions, and proceed[s] at once to subordinate them" (738). In other words, it is an approach which attempts to decontextualise the Bible, to look at it as an isolated text without cultural and historical influences or ramifications. He concludes his review by writing:

One may acknowledge that an ideal study of the Bible must find and communicate religious insights, wherever they are actually present; and that it should trace the coherence of these insights, wherever the coherence is real.

But, at the same time, one may reasonably object to the obscuring of any genuine enlightenment, even when it is felt to be in the interest of a larger enlightenment; for the result may be illusion. If the post-critical study of the Bible is ever to justify itself, it must absorb criticism, not side-step it. (740)

Graves' Biblical work does absorb criticism. It is post-critical in the same sense that it is postmodern: it draws upon a variety of sources, some of which are canonical and others which are merely mythic or folk tales but, importantly, treating all sources as equally valuable. Graves never resorts to the sort of "post-critical" method that insists upon taking events or statements upon faith without a historical document to back the conjecture.

The strongest example of Graves' "post-critical" Biblical scholarship is *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. Published and reviewed seven years after Harrison's commentary, Graves and Podro's work seems to do exactly what Harrison has asked. A somewhat lengthy, but useful, quotation on Graves' method from the introduction to *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* will best serve to summarise the process of thought that led Graves to his conclusions on how to interpret the events that comprise the life and times of Jesus.

Most Catholic views on Jesus's identity and life must be discounted. He was set apart from his contemporaries because John the Baptist had acclaimed him as the Saviour of his nation; was crowned King with all the ancient rites; ceremonially reborn from a Levite virgin, and made an honorary High Priest, though physically descended from the royal House of David. Thereafter, as the King—Messiah, he had to follow a rule of conduct laid down by the Prophets and hagiographers; and since the precise details of this rule are known, the truth of the Gospel narratives can be tested by it.

Jesus expected the present world to end during his lifetime in a series of catastrophes known as the 'Pangs of the Messiah'. The Kingdom of Heaven, which would then be inaugurated and last for a thousand years, with Jerusalem for its capital, was to be a heaven on earth, peopled partly by resurrected saints, partly by a few living saints who would not die until the world ended. True to his Pharisaic principles, Jesus declined to perform miracles in proof of his divine authority (Mark 8, 12), and apart from a few faith cures, the accounts of which have been greatly exaggerated and for which he gave all credit to God, was content to foretell the wonders of the

coming Kingdom. Yet certain of his acts that conveyed a moral lesson have been misreported as miracles, to rival those reputedly performed by Apollonius of Tyana. The appearance of angels in the Gospel narrative—except where they are inspired human messengers, or dream visitants—formed no part of the original Apostolic tradition, which will have been as free from supernatural embellishments as the Talmudic accounts of first-century sagas.

Jesus never identified himself with God, or even with the transcendental Son of Man. His title 'Son of God' was an ancient religious one acquired at the Coronation. He preached that only devout Jews, who kept the spirit as well as the letter of the Law, could qualify for the Kingdom of Heaven; Gentiles who had not accepted circumcision and the yoke of the Law were excluded. In his view, the imminence of the Pangs was manifested by many signs of the times, and all who desired salvation must therefore cease to live a normal life, observe strict chastity and avoid every kind of pollution. He made the statutory round of his dominions, and by preaching as he went and sending out chosen missionaries, gave his whole people the chance to repent and be saved: and presently decided that the time had come to offer himself as a royal sacrifice for them. The manner of the sacrifice had been laid down in the last chapters of Zechariah, which deal with the 'Worthless Shepherd'. Only by careful examination of these can Jesus' actions during Passion Week be intelligibly reconstructed.

Though our restoration of the Nazarene Gospel may not be correct in every detail, it is at least free from the historical objections to which the

Canonical Gospels are exposed. We hold that Jesus, a well-documented personage of the first century, can be understood only in terms of his contemporary background, and are at pains to emphasize what the Church has been at pains to suppress: that he neither preached to the Gentiles, nor encouraged his apostles to do so, nor showed any concern for their fate; and that he hourly expected the literal fulfilment of eschatological prophecies. We hold also that he officially died on the Cross; but afterwards, when he recovered from his deathlike coma, and found that the Kingdom of Heaven had not come, it was gradually borne in upon him that sacrifice had been premature. He therefore tried to expiate his error by self-exile from Palestine, intending to return only when the 'Day of the Lord' finally dawned. The Apostles continued the missionary work in obedience to his parting orders. Later, their expectation that he would triumphantly reappear became a dogma with the Gentile Churches; but he was then believed to be seated in Heaven on the right hand of God, rather than wandering somewhere in the far East among the Jews of the Dispersal, a penitent and branded fugitive. (*Between Moon*, 293-4)

Quite clearly, according to this passage, Graves considered Jesus an historical figure whose legend had been misconstrued by Gentile Christians. His method was to compare the Christian Church's records of Jesus' life in the Gospels with the Scriptural teachings which Jesus would have followed to become his nation's Christ. Graves then revealed any aberrations between the two, excised the alterations to the story and rewrote the underlying truth maintaining its theological and political foundations.

While *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* is Graves' last major work on the subject of Jesus, he and his co-author Joshua Podro did also publish *Jesus In Rome* which they, in the subtitle, claimed was only an "historical conjecture" and not of the same substance as their previous and more scholarly effort. Very basically, in *Jesus in Rome*, they posit the thesis that during his self-imposed exile after surviving the cross, Jesus made his way to Rome where he attempted to fulfil elements of his prophecy that he had missed in his haste to prompt the "pangs of the messiah". While the historical conjecture is convincing, Graves and Podro admit that it is founded upon fewer historical sources and they, therefore, do not treat their conclusions as seriously as some of those derived in the earlier work.

The Nazarene Gospel, despite its scholarship, as the reviewer Moses Hadas identifies, is not without its problems; however, he does write that

The basis of their arguments, as is inevitable, is stronger than the structure they have erected upon it. Where they point to misunderstanding of Hebrew forms of discourse and the like they are persuasive; where they attribute personal motives to Jesus or Paul their argument tends to run in a circle, the reconstructed text and the imagined motive each being invoked to support the other. The problem is based upon the text, the solution upon the fancy of the authors. It need not be the only solution; what can be said for it is that it shows a certain consistency and hence plausibility. (7)

Graves and Podro, as Hadas has shown, seem to fit squarely in the post-war debate on the function of religion debated at the congress on Religion and the Intellectuals.

They seek to demystify their subject and also to reveal a political slant that has, historically, been bound within it. Faith is not at issue—neither theirs nor that of their

potential readers. Instead, it seems to be Graves and Podro's task to demonstrate the consistency and (in the sense of the term as Eliot uses it) historical simultaneity of a particular strain of religious practice.

In times when religious institutions governed the state, speculation on the accuracy of the Word was forbidden. The Spanish Inquisition, for example, seems a strangely distant terror, and the stories of that era of fundamentalism and rigidity seem cruel and harsh. Carlo Ginzburg in his work *The Cheese and the Worms* shows just how relentless the persecution of the inquisitors could be when they considered someone's deviant thinking could be construed as a danger to their power. Ginzburg tells the story of Menocchio, a sixteenth century miller whose inventive readings of the Bible, Boccaccio and various other printed sources persuaded the inquisitors to arrest him, imprison him and, after he failed to repent, burn him at the stake. What becomes clear from Ginzburg's account is that Menocchio was a creative thinker whose intertextual historicisation of Biblical legends was more a flight of naïve fancy than of religious or political intrigue. A certain element of Inquisitorial days remains today amongst the defenders of individual belief systems when they encounter a work which seems to undermine their power and authority. Graves' novel, as the reviews it received demonstrated, was received with a fair amount of hostility. Fortunately, Graves' time was far less dangerous than Menocchio's even if Graves' scholarship was ultimately more heretical.

Despite the danger of persecution from an usually unforgiving Catholic and Protestant churches, the tradition of writing histories about Jesus has persisted for nearly as long as the legend of Jesus himself. The Gospels, in all their known variations, are, in effect, simply a mythologised version of actual historical events.

Most scholars acknowledge that whatever the original Aramaic oral origins of the Gospel stories might have been, the twentieth century only owns highly expurgated and politically contrived versions of doubtful origin, intent and authenticity. At least, that is the opinion of New Testament scholars like Hyam Maccoby who, in an article for *Gravesiana: the Journal of the Robert Graves Society*, writes, approvingly and in sympathy with Graves that

... many of the incidents in the Gospels have to be “despiritualised” in order to arrive at their historical meaning. The Pauline Church has depoliticised Jesus, in its editing of the Gospels, in order to make him acceptable to Rome. The Pauline Church wishes to avoid all awareness of Jesus as a claimant to the Jewish throne. So various incidents which actually form part of the ritual of enthronement of a Near Eastern king are given purely spiritual meaning. (50)

While Maccoby clearly hints that the subject of Graves’ projects for writing about Jesus might be considered heretical, the substance of his statement clearly approves the practicality of Graves’ method.

In many ways, the attitude of society in the 1980s and 1990s toward religion is unique in relation to the remainder of the twentieth century. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, society underwent a tremendous transformation in its moral and ethical outlook as a result of the realisation that the power to encourage an apocalypse need not be left to anything like the mythical four horseman or the sacrifice of a Messiah upon on a cross. The nuclear bomb seemed, as was demonstrated at the close of the Second World War, quite likely to herald a suitably horrific end of the world. Given the belief that the latter might occur imminently,

religion, God and His ability to protect His flock was widely questioned. It seemed that the fate of mankind was truly in the hands of the generals and politicians.

Graves' poetic output during the Second World War was minimal. It seems as though he were trying to avoid direct engagements in moral, political or ethical debates. The slim volume, *Poems 1938-1945*, discussed earlier and the few veiled references to the general stupidity of humanity in poems such as "The Shot" and "The Beach" are the extent of the commentary he made on the period in his poems. No doubt, since Graves considered himself primarily a poet, this very silence was a profound statement of his disbelief that after the sacrifice made by his generation, the world could descend to the brutality of war again. However, given the political, social and intellectual mood in which Graves was living and writing, it is not surprising to find elements of the debate that had begun to dominate discussion within society within Graves' own contributions to its cultural fabric.

Societal preoccupation with a potential disaster on an apocalyptic scale was widespread. Graves was not untouched by it. In a letter written to Gordon Wasson in May 1951, Graves wrote a closing paragraph which simultaneously reveals his attitude toward Christianity and Stalinist Russia: "Jesus was admirable. But there is a regrettably close similarity between the Stalinist technique of documentary perversion of history (e.g. in the treatment of Trotsky's part in the war) and that of the Evangelists" (*Between Moon*, 94). Graves believed that the legend of Jesus, just like the legends of the various historical figures whose histories he had already rewritten, had been corrupted. And his reference to Stalinist revisionist history makes it clear that Graves thought that the justifications and intentions of historical revisionists had

always been the same: to construct and ratify, through history and allegory, a deviant and illogical system.

"Jesus was admirable", as Graves wrote to Wasson, but Jesus, like Belisarius and Hercules, was also guilty of leaving his historical duties unfulfilled. The lack of closure to Jesus' project allowed Paul to doctor his teachings and to produce a religion antithetical to Christ's own, as it were, Christian beliefs. In this sense, a parallel can be drawn between Paul and Procopius. Paul, just like Procopius, rewrote and doctored the legend of an historical person for his own gain. Even if, as was the case with Procopius, the motivation for writing his version of events was a personal gain that would merit a slight improvement of one's image for posterity. Similarly, Claudius' venture into autobiography can be, given Graves' sustained criticism of historical revisionists, viewed as relatively innocent compared to Paul's reworking of an entire system of faith.

Graves, in *King Jesus*, exploits the opportunity of writing a novel based upon a legend which (in the Western world) is universally known—albeit known, as Graves would argue, regardless of the Christian denomination which supposes superior knowledge to the uninitiated non-believer, naïvely. Graves approaches the stories of the Bible as a critical literary historian who is versed in New Critical methodology. The inherent truth of the Bible is rejected by Graves outright as are Christian interpretations which are based upon the affective fallacy¹⁶. Given that

¹⁶ The affective fallacy is described by Wimsatt and Beardsley as "... a confusion between the poem [or text] and its results (what it is and what it does), a special case of epistemological scepticism, though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims

Graves believed that Paul and Paul's followers had set an alternative agenda for the cult of Jesus than Jesus had intended himself, the intentionalist fallacy is also used by Graves to reject any Christian version of Jesus' legend. Graves, instead, turns to the sources of the Gospels, the scriptures and the Old Testament and, in a series of works which span, quite literally, Jesus' entire career, demonstrates their mythological and ritual foundations.

Graves' knowledge of the Bible is extensive. He read not only the canonical texts but also various Hebrew and Christian myths which are not often associated with Biblical scholarship. Graves' collaborators on his various biblical works (Joshua Podro and Raphael Patai) expressed their amazement of Graves' broad knowledge of Hebrew scripture, canonical and non-canonical sources, as well as his ability to draw these disparate works together for a sustained theory of some particular aspect of religious history. Raphael Patai, for example, in a book cataloguing the development of the writing of the *Hebrew Myths* which he undertook with Graves, claims that it was Graves who set him on the idea that Greek religions owed a debt to Eastern religions (Patai, 19-20). Patai went on to develop that notion in one of his best known works, *Man and Temple*, which, not so coincidentally, was on the subject of Hebrew installation rites and rituals (21).

than the overall forms of scepticism. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome ... is that the poem [or text] itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear" (Wimsatt, 31).

The installation rites of Hebrew Kings are an integral part of the thesis which Graves develops for his claim that Jesus Christ was, in fact, the rightful heir to the Jewish throne. Graves has Agabus, his narrator, repeat on several occasions that his reader should beware of the unreliability of the Christian accounts of the story of Jesus. In a scene which reflects upon the historical accuracy of the key event of the novel in which Jesus is crowned as King, Agabus repeats this warning:

The Acts and Sayings of Jesus originally written in Aramaic but circulated in Greek translation among the Gentile Churches, should not be read without careful critical reserve. Several variants exist. The editing is often fraudulent, yet it is a handbook which serves conveniently both to attract converts and to disarm the suspicions of those civil authorities for whom Chrestian (sic) is merely another name for Jew. Being no more than a skeleton of the full story of Jesus, it is supplemented by a secret oral tradition communicated stage by stage to initiates as they are judged worthy of the revelation. (238)

The ritual surrounding the coronation of Jesus forms the climactic scene in the novel and is, in fact, the very focus of events without which the novel may be interpreted as merely a foil for another explication of Graves' ideas on the White Goddess.

However, the installation ritual creates another very important strand in the novel which makes the thesis that Jesus was a political figure vying for material as well as spiritual power valid:

... King Herod when crowned King of the Jews underwent the same indignity, which was the occasion of his remembering the prophetic buffets that Father Manahem had dealt him at Bozrah. But the ritual assault upon King Jesus by

the seven notables of Tabor was a more ancient and cruel one by far, performed again after more than a thousand years in fulfilment of prophecy.

They wrestled with him, seven against one, until they had forced him to kneel with thighs divaricated. Then the tallest and boldest of them climbed on the stone and leapt down on him, and by that act of violence the marring was completed. Jesus's left thigh was put out of joint, the head of the bone being displaced and lodged in the muscles of the thigh; and his left leg stretched out in spasm and twisted, so that thereafter he limped with what is called the sacred lameness. The eighth sign of royalty had been added and he had uttered no cry or word of complaint. Mary the elder and Mary the younger wept for pity. But the tall old woman standing beside them suddenly drew back her veil, kissed the younger Mary on both cheeks, laughed terribly and fled back into the wood. (224)

The presence of the two Marys and the "tall old woman" is returned to again in the concluding pages of the novel; however, it is clearly intended to allude to Graves' notion of the White Goddess. The old woman is the "crone" aspect of the Goddess' trinity. Her presence at Jesus' coronation ritual seems to indicate that Graves wanted to suggest that, just as in the Greek and Latin mythic tradition, the gods were witness to and played a part in the trials of their mortal champions. However, it is also a statement on the divine roots to the rights of the throne that Jesus was engaged with. In other words, while Jesus was not himself divine, he was attempting to fulfil divine scripture.

Jesus' attempted usurpation of the Jewish throne then, as it is followed through in the novel, is much like Jason's quest for the Fleece as it is represented by

Graves in *Hercules, My Shipmate*: a ritual voyage in which the followers of one divinity try to assert the power and ascendancy of their god over that of another.

However, in as much as Jesus' struggle was to assert the power of his god and of his faith over that of the Mother Goddess, it is also about his struggle with the dominant Roman rule and also of the control of spiritual faith in Jerusalem by the Caiaphas and the Jewish elders. Graves has Pilate recognise the legitimacy of Jesus' claim and offer him the throne in a new partnership between Church and state:

"Come now, King Jesus, you cannot be the simpleton that you pretend to be. I am ready to overlook your highly discourteous silence and to give you one more chance to secure glory for yourself and your posterity and to inaugurate a new Golden Age for you distressed subjects. I am prepared to put your claim before Aelius Sejanus, first securing the endorsement of my immediate superior, the Governor-General of Syria. I need not conceal from you that I make this offer largely because of my dislike of the tubby Tetrarch and of those Sanhedrin rats on the porch; and of course I expect you to remember me generously once you have come to power. ..." (329)

In this passage, Graves has subtly manipulated the Gospel account of Jesus' trial before Pilate. All the canonical Gospels are agreed that Pilate, after having Jesus' case introduced to him, turned to Jesus and asked, "Are you the King of the Jews" to which, again in all the Gospels, Jesus responds, "You have said so". Clearly, the Gospels make no mention of Jesus' ambitions to the throne. Graves, as his interpretation demonstrates, thought otherwise. Jesus, of course, rejects Pilate's offer in both the Gospel accounts and Graves' rereading. Had he accepted it, he would have been sharing his rule of the "Kingdom on earth".

A shared rule of the earthly and spiritual kingdom was in direct contradiction of the singular nature of the God whose cause Jesus was the champion. In the highly poetic scene in which Jesus does battle with Mary the Hairdresser, the Goddess' high priestess, he rejects the historical precedent to share his rule of the material world with her and a tanist ruler:

He took the lamp and studied the tablets as if with indifference. "What are these to me, witch? Have I not read the Scriptures? Here, pictured in a confused order, are the annals of kings and princes and prophets of Israel."

"In your own heart lies the confusion. Here is one story and one story only. It runs boustrophedon—as one ploughs alternately from right to left and from left to right. When the golden tablet is done, the red begins. It is the story of the ancient covenant from which the Ark takes its name: the covenant sworn between my Mistress and the twin Kings of Hebron; that she will share her love and her anger equally between them both so long as they obey her will. Here it begins." (213)

The phrase, "... one story and one story only" is clearly a reference to the poem which Graves was writing at about this time, "To Juan at the Winter Solstice". The opening line of the poem reads, "There is one story and one story only". As has been commented earlier, it is a poem that is considered by critics of Graves' poetry to be among his best White Goddess poems since it expresses so precisely the thesis which Graves was later to posit in *The White Goddess*: that there is only one story, all myths are merely variations on the same eternal theme.

The aspect of Jesus' trials which deals with his struggles for power is redressed by Graves in his revisionist account of the other and better known Biblical

version of Jesus' coronation. The only mention of any sort of coronation of Jesus in the Bible is, of course, a sequence of events that begins with Pilate "washing his hands of the incident", the crowning of Jesus with a crown of thorns, and then the fastening of the plaque, meant as a sarcastic slight, "King of the Jews" upon the cross. Again, Graves reinterprets this "historical" moment and shows it in an entirely different light:

Pilate called for a basin, and publicly washed his hands in a solemn caricature of the Jewish ceremony by which City elders absolve themselves of guilt when an unexplained murder occurs in their district. He told Caiaphas: "If you decide to crucify your King, I will lend you a crucifixion party. That is as much as I can undertake to do."

"But the statement of crime? An execution is illegal without a statement of crime, and I have no authority to write one, especially as crucifixion is not a Jewish practice. You must at least write us out the statement; so much authority you are bound to accept."

...

But Jesus' statement of crime surprised and alarmed the grandees. It was not, as they had expected:

Majesta: Quod se Regem Judeaorum Finxit Esse.

High Treason: to wit, pretending to be King of the Jews.

but:

Hic est Jesus Nazareus, Rex Judaeorum.

This is Jesus the Nazirite, the King of the Jews.

...

Still dressed in his regal finery, he was taken to Herod's citadel, the Tower of Phasael, which was now the Roman barracks. There he was stripped naked and underwent the preliminary scourging which is an inseparable part of crucifixion. The captain on duty laid on unmercifully with his supple vine-rod until weariness obliged him to desist. Then he handed Jesus over, bruised and bleeding, to the common soldiers, who dressed him up again and tried to make him play "Guess who struck you", and the cruel May Day game of "King and Courtiers", for which they plaited him a thorny acacia; but he provided them with poor sport and after half an hour or so they let him go and settled down to dice. (334-40)

Graves' version of the event, while logically not much different from the Biblical account, does put an emphasis on a practical explanation of what might otherwise seem mystical and mysterious symbolism. The thorny crown, the robes and even the plaque erected above Jesus' cross as an explanation of his crime are logically explained and shown to stem from his prosecutor's belief that he really was King.

Similarly, throughout the novel, Graves explains away many seemingly mystical events from the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus with either common sense or by claiming that the miraculous nature of some of Jesus' actions were in fact merely rituals that were subsequently misinterpreted by the writers of the Gospels as miracles. Jesus' healings, for example, are clearly described as, at their most spectacular, faith healings. Importantly, there is no miracle attached to them and, in fact, the narrative makes every attempt to make certain that the reader re-think his or her former interpretation of the events as miraculous:

Jesus understood from her interruptive groans that she was vexed not only with Peter but with himself as the cause of Peter's idleness, and also with her daughter, who had humoured Peter by preparing a rich meal in honour of the occasion. She had decided to spoil the meal by taking herself to her bed and shamming a high fever. His whispered words were: "Mother, if you wish for salvation, forgive your son, honour your guest, spare you daughter shame!"

Peter and Andrew were astonished at the seeming miracle, and the old woman, now eating and drinking heartily, did not undeceive them. Her hostility toward Jesus had vanished when she found that he treated her with greater gentleness and respect than she had ever had from her son-in-law.

The news of these two spectacular cures spread quickly, and in the cool of the evening, when the Sabbath officially ended, a large number of sick people were brought to the boat-house for Jesus to heal. (232-3)

Quite clearly, Graves wanted to demystify Jesus' divine origins and contacts. It was important for Graves' interpretation of the story and the historical personage that Jesus be recognised for being a talented and ambitious but otherwise ordinary man.

While it might be supposed that Graves' theories which play down the divinity of Jesus would be popular with a Jewish community that was attempting to resurrect itself after the Second World War, they were not. Graves discovered that many of his detractors came from amongst the Jewish intellectual community.

Mordecai Chertoff, for example, whose review of Graves' *King Jesus* will be discussed further below, expressed his frustration with Graves' liberal use of sources:

"And he uses not only established historical fact in this manner, but superstition and folklore as well, and gives equal authority to history and fable and the Talmud and the

Church Fathers and Irish poetry and the *Toldot Yeshu* (a collection of fables regonized as “history” only by Graves)” (392). Presumably, Chertoff’s worry is that Graves’ use of myths and fables will serve to trivialise the Jewish faith. There may be some truth to Chertoff’s concern; however, it is also abundantly clear on the basis of Graves’ extensive scholarship on the subject that such a conclusion could not be further from Graves’ ambition for his work. Quite clearly, despite Chertoff’s negative predisposition to Graves’ liberal scholarly use of “historical” sources, Graves was extremely well read on Biblical matters.

One can speculate as to the reasons underlying the lack of interest in non-academic biblical studies today; however, it would probably not be wrong to suggest that the secularisation of contemporary society combined with a postmodernist rejection of universal values results in the transference of faith upon a surrogate belief system. Today, more interest and attention is given to the potential fates dealt to society by Mammon and Far Eastern stock market movements than by an ancient God. In Graves’ time, that surrogate would have been less clearly defined. The end of the Second World War was defined not only by the broadening of theological issues as a result of the holocaust but was also marked by the beginning of a cold war which pitted two super powers with radically different ideological agendas against one another. Nevertheless, for a plurality of reasons, the very foundations upon which Western religious belief systems, and hence its culture, had been founded began to fissure. Graves exploits this fissure, especially with *King Jesus*, by forcing his readers to examine the foundations of their faith.

Religious beliefs current at the time that Graves wrote his novel notwithstanding, Graves argued that Jesus was a politician and an activist who

campaigned exclusively for a Jewish, not a Gentile, cause. Throughout the novel, Graves shows Jesus to be a zealous devotee of the strict regime of the Law. However, Graves also demonstrated that it was as a result of Jesus' misinterpretation of the prophecy for the Hebrew Messiah that led to the failure of his project of establishing God's Kingdom on Earth. The social-political-devotional movement that Jesus founded but did not complete allowed Paul, after the death of Jesus, to embark on a crusade to establish the cult of Jesus upon which the foundations for a religion which subsequently persecuted—and very ironically at that—the very faith for which Jesus had fought and died. This is the crime with which Graves charges the historical Jesus. Significantly, the charges against Jesus for his historical failure fits within a thesis that argues for Graves' developing notion of the hero. However, the other strand of the story, that which connects Jesus' trials with the historical demise of the White Goddess is more difficult to rectify unless one recognises that the two are indelibly twinned in Graves' writings.

Graves was not interested in writing books that praised Jesus for what Christianity has propagated as his immaculate nature. Rather, his concern was for arriving at an understanding of how such a powerful religion could have come to being on the basis of stories and legends that recorded the actions of one man and his followers—and the key here is that Graves believed Jesus to be just a man. Early on in *King Jesus*, Graves, through his narrator, makes it clear that he does not believe in the notion of the virgin birth, that the mystical aspect of the story was propagated by the Christians in order to hide the true hereditary right Jesus had to the throne of Israel:

I grant the political expediency of keeping certain remarkable facts connected with Jesus's birth and parentage concealed from all but the inner circle of Christian initiates. I have discovered these by patient and discreet inquiry, and it is clear to me that if they were laid before the Emperor he could hardly be blamed for suspecting that the other-worldly religious communism of Christianity was a cloak for militant Jewish royalism. I also grant the expediency of Paul's decision to dissociate the new faith as far as possible from the faith from which it sprang, and though it is untrue to say that the Jews as a nation rejected Jesus, it is true enough that ever since the Fall of Jerusalem the poor remnants of the Jewish nationalists have detested not only the Gentile Christians but the Judaic sort as well. These offended by what seemed at the time a cowardly and unpatriotic refusal to assist in the defence of the Holy City; quitting Judea and settling at Pella across the Jordan. (10-11)

Graves was not interested in the "fantastic" events of history unless they could be considered a coherent and cohesive part of a historical whole. The virgin birth was one of those events which Graves intuitively knew could not be true, that it, in fact, must have a historical foundation which would provide a justification for a Christian reinscription of the event into the seemingly pagan form in which it occurs in the Bible.

In the case of the birth of Jesus, the Greek practice demonstrated in *Hercules*, *My Shipmate* and discussed in the previous chapter of ritual "rebirths" seems to inform Graves' reading of the Christian event. In fact, later on in the novel, Graves further explicates Jesus' true origins by discussing the failed bid for Antipater (Jesus' actual father), the son of King Herod, to marry Mary which leaves Mary with child

and desperate to marry decently. She enters an arranged marriage with Joseph who already has several wives and children, and amongst whom Mary and her child, the heir to the throne, can easily be hidden from Antipater's father's agents (52-66).

Graves then goes on to describe how Jesus enters a ritual marriage himself in order to uphold the tradition of Jewish kings being confirmed from both patri and matrilineal descent (226-8). Put simply, he was the rightful heir to the throne and he knew it.

Jesus, as Graves' story runs, was on a mission to restore himself to the throne as the head of a new Kingdom, fundamentalist in its love for God and radical and revolutionary in its treatment of the occupying Gentiles and Romans.

Quite clearly, such a radical rereading of the Biblical version of the story of Jesus' life was not expected to be lightly accepted by the general public in the way that his other historical novels had been, especially, by the religious. As a result of the controversy that it caused, sales went well. It was on the back of the novel's success that Graves wrote to T.S. Eliot encouraging him to publish *The White Goddess* despite its esoteric subject matter:

Perhaps the book [*The White Goddess*] will not have such a limited sale as I thought at first; because my *King Jesus* is arousing what is technically called a storm of controversy and in *The White Goddess* I justify all, or practically all, the mythological theory I introduced into it. (*Between Moon*, 37)

However, despite the potential anger that the novel was likely to produce, Robert Graves in setting out to write a history of Jesus faced an irresistibly tantalising prospect. Like his other historical subjects, Jesus' story was wonderfully convoluted, and Graves would be able to assert that he, in writing the history, was about to set it right. In the process, he could show why Christianity was based on entirely the

wrong principles. For example, he could demonstrate, categorically, that the separation of the Christians and the Jews in the first century was engineered for entirely political reasons:

After its [Jerusalem's] capture by Titus many of them [Judeo-Christians] were tempted to renounce Judaism because of the double disadvantage of being ill-treated as Jews by the Romans and despised by the Jews as traitors. But they would not renounce their allegiance to Jesus. Must they then modify their principles and enter the Gentile Christian Church originally controlled by the Apostle Philip but reorganized after Philip's death by their former enemy and persecutor Paul—the very man who had once thrown James down the steps of the Temple? ...

It was a hard choice, and only a few chose the more heroic alternative of keeping true to the Law. (11)

As this passage demonstrates, Graves argued that Christians in general, and Paul in particular, were Jesus' turncoats and not the Jews. Graves could also show that it was the Christians who abandoned the faith from which their religion was born. In Graves' view, Christians abandoned Judaism in order to lessen their trouble with their Roman rulers rather than steadfastly holding by their religion despite the danger of antagonising their oppressors.

Graves was not so much intent on championing the Jewish faith (though he shows the Jewish religious doctrine to be more historically and mythologically sound than the Christian) as he was in demonstrating how Jesus Christ was the tool through which matritheistic religion was finally quashed. Much like Hercules, whom Graves showed to have failed as a hero—failed as a hero because he was not able to cope

with the historical magnitude of his legend—Jesus was faced with the prospect of living up to the strict regime and doctrine of a broadly accepted sequence of events prescribed by the scriptures. Jesus, in effect, was the puppet of the legacy of a legend which he sought to fulfil.

The fulfilment of his legend affects the way in which Graves politicises Jesus which is to show him as someone who was keenly aware of his historical task—a task which ultimately proved too large for him to cope with. Graves, in his novel, sets about to demonstrate that Jesus’ goal was to displace, once and for all, Goddess worshipping and to elevate “his father” to the ruler of not only the immaterial world of logic and of reason but also to the material world formerly guarded by the White Goddess. Jesus does defeat the Goddess; however, he cannot fulfil the remainder of the prophecies as the “true Messiah” and instead retires his crown, vanquished.

Quite clearly, the battle that Graves has Jesus engage in with the Goddess is one which is personal to Graves. Given that Graves’ *The White Goddess* and *King Jesus* were written virtually contemporaneously, it is not surprising that the works share so many ideas. Many critics and reviewers were taken aback by Graves’ supposition that Jesus’ mission was to displace the Goddess from rule. Chertoff, in his review, even argues that Graves’ concern with the female as the cause for man’s fall from grace reveals Graves’ fundamentally Christian approach to a Jewish subject (391). However, by making this claim, Chertoff is missing the point of the novel. The novel is not “written” by Graves. It is written in the voice of Agabus, a sceptical Greek, removed by a generation from the events of the story. As a result, when *Agabus* writes “... as the Second Adam Jesus’s self-imposed task was to undo the evil which, according to the patriarchal legend, the First Adam had caused by sinfully

listening to the seductive plea of his wife Eve" (9), the reader should realise that he is writing from the perspective of a conveniently distant observer who does not believe in the faith but does believe that the story of Jesus makes an "extraordinary" tale:

I have never in all my reading come across its match. And, after all, if the Gentile Chrestians, despite the clear prohibitions of the Hebrew Law against idolatry, are moved to partake of Jesus's substance in their symbolic Eucharist and to worship him as a God, declaring "None was ever like him before, nor will be again, until he returns to earth!"—who, except the devout Jew, can blame them? To be laid at birth in a manger-basket, to be crowned King, to suffer voluntarily on a cross, to conquer death, to become immortal: such was the destiny of this last and noblest scion of the most venerable royal line in the world. (16)

Clearly, Agabus respects not the Christian religion, but the heroic figure upon whom the cult was founded. As such, his readings of the events of his life are necessarily naïve relative to contemporary Christian theological accounts. The opposition between Agabus' secular interpretation of a religious and cultic figure and the Christian tradition that Graves expects his reader to own creates the tension in the novel. The reader is expected to, at first, be surprised by Agabus' heathen rendition of the events and then, only gradually, to become convinced that perhaps "Agabus'" version is the more correct one.

Graves' novel is not limited to his issue with the displacement of Goddess worship by a patriarchal belief system or of the wonder of the story of Jesus. He also set a social agenda for the novel. As has been demonstrated earlier, Graves' poetry and fiction is often charged with affairs that might be considered more public than

private. *King Jesus* is not exempt from this covert strategy. St. Paul is, for example, one of the chief objects of derision in the novel. Graves is attempting to show the correctness of the Jewish claim that Jesus was their Messiah and, in effect, lambasting the false foundations of Christian worship. Graves, in a letter to Joshua Podro, wrote in response to the unfavourable review by Mordecai Chertoff:

The Jewish monthly *Commentary* of New York has sent me a very carelessly written and unfortunate review of *King Jesus* by Mordecai Chertoff. Heaven knows, I am not an authority on Jewish history but I do know the elements of it; ... Chertoff said that I accused the Jews of killing Jesus! and (among other things) that 'the pious Jews of his day shunned Greek'!

(*Between Moon*, 45)

Quite clearly, Graves' tone in the letter reveals his incredulity at the accusations levelled against him by Chertoff. Graves in setting out the thesis for his story in the introduction to the novel makes it patently clear that he does not believe in the notion propagated by Christian devotees that the Jews were in the least responsible for the death of Jesus:

The Jews are also accused of having officially sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion after a formal trial by the Beth Din, or religious High Court; they did nothing of the sort. Nobody with the least knowledge of Jewish legal procedure can possibly credit that the High Court condemned him to death; or doubt that it was the Roman soldiers who crucified him at Pilate's order. (12)

Nevertheless, Chertoff's comment, it seems, hit a raw nerve. The issues—issues which are most certainly of a public concern—that Graves seemed to want to emphasise most strongly in the text are the very ones with which Chertoff disagreed.

Graves might have gone on to mention that Chertoff's review includes a warning to readers of Graves' book who might not realise that "Graves' intention in writing his 'novel' was not to compose a historical pot-boiler" and that they might "... take this invented lore for the real thing and read his fantasy for the sake of edification and erudition" (392-3). It seems rather obvious, given that Graves went on to write *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* and *Jesus in Rome* as though to respond to his detractors, that an education is what Graves hoped his reader would gain from the novel.

Evidently, Chertoff was not in a charitable mood when he wrote the review since he also refers to Graves' novel as "drab" and "simply boring" (393, 391). Nevertheless, some of his observations are significant and made all the more so since he challenges Graves on points of scholarship. Clearly, Chertoff read Graves as a scholar and his novel as a product of scholarship. Perhaps, because of the subject of this novel critics examined Graves' historical method more closely than they had with his previous efforts. A reviewer of *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, which follows the method established in *King Jesus* to its logical conclusion, makes the observation that "... there is much learning in this book, its strength like its weakness, is in its approach (though not its close systematic treatment) is analogous to that of Graves' 'Claudius' novels. There, too, evidence which professional scholars had rejected was made to support an ingenious reconstruction" (Hadas, 7). Clearly, the *Claudius* novels were broadly accepted (though Classicists did grumble at some of Graves' conclusions) because the novels did not directly deal with issues as sensitive as theology, morality or societal ethics. Tellingly, Hadas' criticism makes it clear that the public would not likely allow Graves the same "scholarly" liberties with material that affected their faith.

The historical Jesus was, as Graves purports in his many works on the subject, living to a prophesied version of himself; in other words, living in the role of a “Jesus” prescribed by the scriptures in order to become that prophesied Jesus—the Hebrew Messiah. Raphael Patai, a Hebrew scholar and anthropologist who has written tens of books on the subject and who was later to co-author the *Hebrew Myths* with Graves, observed upon first reading Graves’ *King Jesus* that

The world in which Jesus moves, as recreated by Graves, is a world of personages who live out their lives in the shadow of their great ancestors, and who are almost like marionettes tied by many invisible as well as visible strings to the hands of great ancestral puppet-masters whose long-past acts and words control their movements. (44)

Quite clearly, Patai found the notion that Jesus was bound to live his life in the way that he did attractive because it shifts the onus of responsibility for his actions from his personal desires and on to scriptural precedent and requirement. Graves’ Jesus is, as will be argued below, a socio-historio-political figure just as much as he is the object of Christian devotion. Christianity is, again as Graves purports, the product of an industrious figure, Jesus, and his colleagues and advisors who found themselves involved in a political movement with very serious implications on the practice of religious devotion itself—a practice which displaced, permanently, pluralistic Goddess worship with the worship of a singular male deity. Like Hercules, then, Jesus found himself playing a part in a long historical struggle between two entirely disparate strains of devotion. And, like Hercules, the result was that Jesus was no more and no less empowered to control his destiny.

The principal difference between Hercules and Jesus is that Jesus, unlike Hercules, is demonstrably conscious of his historical and mythological duties. Put bluntly, Jesus is less of a brute and more of an intellectual than Hercules. Where Graves' Hercules was true to the classical Homeric tradition and remained a pawn of the gods, Graves' Jesus aspired to become a living god by attempting to manipulate history and legend. How Graves constructs this image of Jesus is very important because it is on the basis of this construction that Jesus emerges as a figure equally ironic and unsympathetic to the classical models from which Graves based his characterisation. Homer, for example, exploits the extended trials of Odysseus as a joke for his audience to share, in a sense, with the gods who are making his homeward voyage so difficult. Similarly, Jesus' metaphorical voyage is interrupted by complications, quite literally tests, that Jesus is obliged to complete before he is allowed to proceed to his next trial. So much between Graves' characterisation and the traditional Biblical version of the story remains the same. However, thanks to Agabus' introduction, Graves' reader is aware that Jesus' voyage will not be completed, that he will, ultimately, fail. As a result, the contrast between the story of Jesus told by the Bible and the one told by Graves is separated by the unbridgable gap created by the situationally ironic structure with its overtones of cosmic irony generated by the intertextual shadow cast upon Graves' novel by the Bible itself. In other words, not only is Jesus, unknowingly, a pawn of the gods, Jesus' story, as it is retold by Graves, is bound by the limits set down by the primary source of his legend, the Bible.

On the basis of Jesus' historical and scriptural savvy, the image of Jesus that Graves presents in the novel is that of a secular figure who attempts to become

deified, at least by popular decree. Knowing the hostility that this image would likely receive, Graves offers an apology in the historical commentary that follows his fictionalisation of the Jesus history. In the apology, Graves writes:

I write without any wish to offend orthodox Catholics, who can afford to disregard my story as irrelevant to their faith; for Catholicism is an incontrovertibly logical system of thought, once it is granted that many of the events mentioned in the Gospels transcend human understanding and must therefore be taken on faith. Though I reject this premise, it will be clear at least that I respect Jesus as having been more uncompromising, more consistent, and more loyal to his God than even most Christians allow. (353)

Graves has, once again, taken to issue the notion that religions that are devoted to male deities are necessarily logical and against the natural illogic of matriarchal faiths. Additionally, in the quotation above, with a rather condescending tone, Graves dismisses any criticism he might receive for his work from Christian followers by asserting that they are effectively too prejudiced in favour of their faith to accept his argumentation. Therefore, Christians need not worry themselves about his interpretations of the events that he has revealed through his investigation.

Writing the story of a secular Jesus from the perspective of a character from ancient history, while certainly a statement on the highly sceptical relationship between society and religion within the twentieth century, emphasises that revisionist readings of events are not exclusive to the modern age. Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historians and writers of fiction ventured into the highly contentious area of the history of Jesus Christ, and many have left it smarting. The tradition of a sceptical historicisation of Jesus most probably began with the

scholars of the Tübingen school in the eighteenth century when they found errors and discrepancies between the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus when they were studied synoptically (Wilson, 27). Most recently, Norman Mailer made headlines by writing Jesus' "autobiography". D.H. Lawrence created a scandal some seventy years earlier when he wrote "The Escaped Cock", a highly-sexed rendition of the speculative version of the events after the crucifixion that had a resurrected Jesus wander off to southern France and start a family with a priestess of Isis. Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* caused a similar furore when the Scorsese film adaptation was released in the late 1980s. Hyam Maccoby, in his book *Revolution in Judea, Jesus and the Jewish Resistance* argued that Jesus was, in fact, a military leader and that the writers of the Gospels have hidden the truth of Jesus as a proto-paramilitary who was crucified because Pilate could not stand the risk of a Jewish rebellion (one which did come only a few years after the death of Jesus) (Maccoby, 50-1).

A list of the various approaches and entirely contrary readings of Jesus could go on for pages. As Ian Wilson has argued in his book, *Jesus: The Evidence*, it is highly unusual for there to be so much uncertainty about the history of Jesus when we have more historical evidence about Jesus from a wider variety of sources than any of his contemporaries such as the Roman Emperors or the high priests of Jerusalem (Wilson, 39). Nonetheless, we seem more ready to accept the stories of the outrageous behaviour of Nero or Caligula, ready to believe that they could pronounce themselves gods, ready to accept almost anything that the primary sources about their lives give to us—even if those accounts contradict one another on key and seemingly fundamental facts. If we consider the four Gospels alone, then we already have more

historical documents about Jesus, of no more or no less dependable or reliable source than those of the Roman emperors. However, we have more than just those four sources. The number of archaeological finds and written accounts of events from Jesus' life do fill libraries.

For a writer such as Graves who made a career of climbing within the slightest fissure of a text and forcing it into a chasm, the contradictions between the stories of Jesus, the conflicts of opinion between respected scholars, and the very sensitivity of the subject made the subject irresistible to him. In fact, since the Christian and Hebrew faiths are so broadly practised, Graves as an anthropological mythographer had the rituals of the variety that Lévi-Strauss or Malinowski would call "primitive" or "primal" to observe first-hand.

Indeed, Graves' fascination with the stories of the Bible and their influence on culture and society provided him with a fascination for all of his life for which he found an outlet in both prose and in poetry. Besides the fictional and historical prose, Graves poetry has also dealt with the issues of faith and the Bible with his 1916 poem, "In the Wilderness" and his 1924 poem, "The Rainbow and the Sceptic" standing out as notable examples. The former, clearly influenced by the notion of the sacrifice being made by his generation in the trenches, ends:

The guileless young scapegoat:

For forty nights and days

Followed in Jesus' ways,

Sure guard behind him kept,

Tears like a lover wept.

The poem's tone toward the image of the misunderstood and maligned scapegoat suggests pity. However, the pity, is in the suffering which is, surely, wasteful. The "young scapegoat" is offered for a sacrifice that was, supposedly, already made by Jesus. From the point of view of this thesis, Graves' various writings on the subject are important because the consistency he maintains toward his subject reinforces the case for a broad reading of his works across his career. Clearly, his various works on the Bible all culminate in his vision for the Bible (including both the Old and New Testaments) as *the* historical source for the foundations of Western society. That vision is made manifestly clear throughout *King Jesus*, and the argument in that work, in turn, informs his major work on the revisionist history of the language of myth in society, *The White Goddess*. The two, quite clearly, are indelibly bound.

The notion of the binding of history with language and language with history suggests that Graves' ideas on the development of culture in society follows on from the tradition established by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*. However, the similarities can only be found in the mutual desire to establish foundations. The most significant difference between their two approaches is where Arnold finds the pillars upon which Western culture built its cultural edifice based upon faith (in the tradition of the Hellenic and Hebraic but most especially, in the Bible) (*Culture*, 39-41), Graves finds it in reoccurring patterns of myth which displace faith with ritual practice. Graves' approach was always going to remain relegated to the margins in a culture that hinged the basis of its learning on a tradition which could clearly be traced from Arnold through Eliot and on to Leavis. Eliot, for example, in his essay on religion and literature, after making a plea for the development of literature and poetry that assumes a Christian bias (*Selected*, 36) goes on to write:

But my point is that such writings [propagandist pro-Christian writings] do not enter into any serious consideration of the relation of Religion and Literature: because they are conscious operations in a world in which it is assumed that Religion and Literature are not related. ... I am convinced that we fail to realize how completely, and yet how irrationally, we separate our literary from our religious judgements. If there could be a complete separation, perhaps it might not matter: but the separation is not, and never can be, complete. If we exemplify literature by the novel—for the novel is the form in which literature affects the greatest number—we may remark this gradual secularization of literature during at least the last three hundred years.

(35-6)

Eliot published his essay in 1935. Thirteen years later he was to be the influential figure and main supporter of Faber and Faber's decision to publish *The White Goddess*. Perhaps what Eliot found appealing about Graves' *Goddess* book was that it does address, and very self-consciously, the influence of religion on literature in general and poetry in particular. Graves' project, of course, was much larger than that.

Furthermore, where Eliot found the contemporary novel in its isolated point of view and insular narrative most lacking, Graves was at his most successful. Graves' novels provide a strong narrator who takes the place, figuratively, as a god-like authority on the text. While few of Graves' narrators are omniscient, they at least overlook the text from a position of authority. Unlike the novels influenced by a modernist displacement of the omniscient narrator with a subjective entity who can only view his or her world through a very limited perspective, Graves' narrators are

nearer to the god-like authority that was found by Eliot to be wanting in the modern text. Unlike Mailer, Graves does not go so far as to write Jesus' story from the first-person, but he does tell the story with great intimacy. Although Graves distances his narrator from Jesus' life by removing him from the events by a generation, he does also lend authority to his narrator by making him an historian and one, at that, who has access to the source material that serves to sanctify the truth of his version of the story. In a manner which, by this stage in his career must have seemed predictable, Graves introduces his narrator and the gist of the novel on the first page:

I, Agabus the Decapolitan began this work at Alexandria in the ninth year of the Emperor Domitian and completed it at Rome in the thirteenth year of the same. It is the history of the wonder-worker Jesus, rightful heir-at-law to the dominions of Herod, King of the Jews, who in the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, the Governor-General of Judaea. Not the least wonderful of Jesus's many feats was that, though certified dead by his executioners after a regular crucifixion, and laid in a tomb, he returned two days later to his Galilean friends at Jerusalem and satisfied them that he was no ghost; then said farewell and disappeared in equally mysterious fashion. King Jesus (for he was entitled to be so addressed) is now worshipped as a god by a sect known as the Gentile Chrestians. (7)

Agabus, as a historian who has set himself the task of chronicling the events of a man who would be a king who would be a god, becomes, in a sense the logical extension of Graves' other narrators.

Claudius' failure as a narrator arose because he attempted to write himself into legend without possessing the necessary attributes of the true hero but attempted, instead, to make up for that lack with an acute and keen awareness of the function of history. Agabus avoids this failing because in this novel the narrator does not attempt to include himself as a figure in the story at all. The outcome of the events are truly irrelevant to Agabus. His task is singular: to tell an historically sound and reasonable story from the perspective of an objective historian. Additionally, Agabus can not be a part of the events because they are, by the time he is writing, already history. He was not even alive when they took place. Jesus does not, like the thoroughly historically and politically ignorant Belisarius, become a pawn of his historians. Belisarius' historical fate suffers because he lacked that very trait that Claudius possessed: historical sense. Finally, Jesus also differs from the other attempted hero of Graves' historical fiction, Hercules, who emerges from Graves' history of his trials as tool of historical forces greater than him because, unlike Hercules, Jesus attempted to alter his prescribed fate.

A subtle reference in the coronation ritual sequence suggests that, in part, Graves' thesis was that Jesus was supposed to have played his part and been sacrificed not to bring about God's Kingdom on Earth but instead to fulfil his role as one in a sequence of deputised Kings who is sacrificed. This is a vital thematic link that connects Graves' overall conception of the poet, the hero, and Jesus. In *The White Goddess*, as Graves argues, Jesus' death can be read as an annual sacrifice to the Mother Goddess:

Then Judas of Kerioth came forward with a seamless linen garment, of the sort reserved for High Priests, saying: "My former master, before he died,

instructed me to put this on you at you anointing.” He clothed Jesus in it.

(221)

Clearly, if one has read *The White Goddess*, the suggestion becomes explicit.

Throughout the work, Graves gives examples of the ritualistic aspect of the selection of the Goddess’ King for each New Year and that King’s subsequent selection of his tanist who will replace him for the year following his ritual sacrifice. This parallel between Graves’ theories in *The White Goddess* and *King Jesus* is further reinforced in an earlier part of the novel when Jesus and Judas are described by Agabus as twins:

Jesus now went into partnership with one Judas, a carpenter from Capernaum, who resembled him in size, build and the colour of his hair. The sight of Jesus and Judas rhythmically sawing down a tree together with a two-handled saw gave Judas the nickname “the Twin” or, in the Aramaic, “Thomas”. (194)

However, while these connections can be made by Graves’ reader, they are not supposed to be recognised by either the narrator or, more importantly, by Jesus himself. Jesus, though well versed in the Scriptures, does not know, as his battle with Mary the Hairdresser reveals, the role of this Goddess in the celestial government of the material world.

In this sense, *King Jesus* continues in a logical and coherent line of development from the catalogue of Graves’ own failures in *Good-Bye to All That*, through the spin-doctored cover up of an inept emperor in Claudius, through the historically malleable Belisarius and the dutiful but overwhelmed Hercules, to, finally, Jesus—the best known legend and hero of them all. Despite his fundamentally heroic traits, Graves’ Jesus embodies all these aspects and comes closest to becoming a truly historical hero. However, Graves’ Jesus emerges from the

text not only as an ironic figure for the reasons discussed above but also because he lacked humility in the company of women and refused to acknowledge the importance of the female deity in the system of religion. He fails because of the certainty in his belief of the truth in his God-given attributes. Graves' Jesus embodies all the traditions of the historical hero; however, he fails most miserably and pathetically of all of the heroes about whom Graves has written. Ironically, Jesus' failure to create God's Kingdom comes about as a result of a keen but overly prejudiced interpretation of an historical role of which he was only too aware. He failed the part he felt destined—but for which he was not necessarily ordained—to play in history.

Graves' ironical reading of Jesus begins to become apparent when the sequence of events that surround his coronation are compared to his image at the end of the novel. Jesus, for example, in attempting to satisfy the prophecies for both the Hebrew Messiah and the King of the Jews is lamed in a complex ritual. Raphael Patai, commentating upon the sources that Graves drew upon for the recreation of the ritual writes:

I was most impressed by Graves' ability to recognize a series of ancient Hebrew coronation rites which he finds were re-enacted at the coronation of Jesus. Among them are the "marring," "laming," or "buffeting" of the king (pp. 244, 263), the coronation journey (p. 260), the giving of a new name to the king (p. 244), the partaking of the "sacred shoulder" (p. 264), the ceremonial or ritual battle, the use of the sceptre and of the sacred oil (p. 266), and the making of the rounds of the kingdom (p. 269). (42)

However, whether Graves got these details absolutely right or not is not as important in terms of the image of Jesus that is developed by the novel, as it is interesting to note the effect upon the overall theme of the work from an easily overlooked passage in the closing pages.

The scene which, effectively, reverses the perceived success of Jesus occurs after Jesus' resurrection and when the apostles are receiving their visitations from him: "It seemed to them that the slower or faster they walked, the slower or faster also he walked, so that they never either caught up with him or lost sight of him. The strangest part of this experience, when they looked back upon it afterwards, was that he no longer seemed to be lame" (350-1). Quite clearly, Graves is referring to the fact that Jesus is no longer a King. His lameness was a result of an appropriation of a habit that was seen to be kingly. Having failed to establish himself upon the throne as the King of the Jews, he walks, once again without a limp. The scene continues though and underlines the point that Graves is trying to make:

They passed Gethsemane and climbed still higher. Near the summit three women stood side by side on a knoll: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary his Queen, and a very tall woman whose face was veiled. These three beckoned to him as if with a single hand, and he went towards them, smiling. But before he reached them, a sudden mist enveloped the mountain and, when it cleared, Jesus and the three women were gone. (351)

The image of the two Marys and the third woman is a clear allusion to the trinity of the Great Goddess. Jesus' "smile" then must clearly be a result of Graves subtly suggesting that Jesus, before finally leaving the earth, acknowledging his failure. His smile is, in effect, a last pathetic gesture, a grin denoting that he now knew that Mary

the Hairdresser (the chief priestess of the Goddess cult whom Jesus had “exorcised” (218-220)) had been right when, before parting company with Jesus, she claimed that “... the end [of the Goddess cult] is not yet, and when the Mother summons me to my duty, I will not fail her” (220). She had not failed. But only she and Jesus could share in that secret since no one else was present the exorcism. Jesus was the one person present at Gethsemane who could have recognised the third woman as Mary the Hairdresser. He knew then that he had been defeated by the Mother Goddess because her representatives and not God’s were on the mount to receive his spirit. His smile acknowledges that Mary the Hairdresser had been right all along about the futility of his mission. Jesus interpreted signs and prophecies of his father well; however, he had missed the many delivered to him by the trinity of women in his life thereby rendering all of his efforts as, ultimately, futile.

Ironically, his apostles leave the mountain and, as instructed by Jesus before he realised his failure, seek to spread the Word and establish God’s Kingdom in anticipation of Jesus’ return. Their actions, in light of Graves’ reading of the history, are also destined to be frustrated. Hence, when Agabus, historically speaking, concludes his history at a time when Christianity, as a cult, is the fastest-spreading new religion in the Roman world, and he repeats the words of an Ebonite bishop told to him, he does so without the realisation that Jesus knew that all his efforts had been wasted because he had not defeated the Goddess outright. Of course, to Agabus, a non-believer, the Christians were simply members of a cult. As a result, the passage that Agabus leaves his reader with, the only passage that might save Jesus’ heroic nature, must be read ironically as though written about the beliefs of Yogic flyers or Scientologists:

Here the story of Jesus seemingly ends, but the Ebonite bishop declared to me:

“No, it is not ended. Jesus by his defeat of death remains alive, an earth-bound Power, excused incarceration in Sheol but not yet risen to Heaven. He is a Power of Good, who persuades men to repentance and love, whereas all other earth-bound Powers (except only Elijah) are evil, and persuade all men to sin and death. In those days neither piety nor iniquity was universal in Israel; therefore the Kingdom could not be established, but established it will be in the end, when the Female is conquered, and then he will reign his thousand years and all the world will obey him. For he will be crowned once more, but this time his queen will be worthy of his virtues: a woman not carnal, nor arrayed in splendour as formerly, but modestly clothed in fine white linen. Seven lamps of wisdom shall burn perpetually before his throne and the four beasts of Horeb shall crouch as guardians about it, singing praise to him without cease. And the corruptive Sea shall be no more. Until that day Israel must remain a peculiar nation, though scattered and persecuted, and at Jerusalem the twelve tribes shall be reunited at last.” (351)

In a sense, the Bishop was right about Jesus’ continued earthly presence. However, Jesus’ Kingdom is a false one. It was established by Paul in direct opposition to the teachings and purpose of Jesus who was in the process of enforcing a more fundamentalist Jewish church with himself at its head as leader of both church and state. In this purpose he failed; however, his presence as a myth and fable are perpetuated.

Interestingly, but only of tangential relevance here, is that Patai has observed that Graves’ anticipation of the foundation of the modern state of Israel was

hauntingly prophetic down to naming its geographical boundaries (42). In a sense, Patai's aside highlights the very political nature of Graves' interpretation of the myth. When Jesus tours his provinces in the ritual circumnavigation of his Kingdom, he is, in a sense, marking the political boundaries of his state (both political and religious).

Graves' reader must know that the bishop was, ultimately, supposed to be read ironically as a result of the other intertextual allusion which emerges from the scene in which Jesus and the three Marys are enshrouded by a mist and vanish. The imagery is, quite clearly, intended to show the similarity and, in fact, the universality of the legends of Jesus and Hercules. Hercules, as was discussed in the previous chapter, "disappeared" under very similar circumstances. However, Graves' belief in the universality of the myth is further reinforced when one reflects upon a scene from Graves' first novel, *My Head! My Head!* in which Moses also vanishes shrouded by mist on a mountain top. There can be no doubt what Graves' intentions by emphasising the similarity of the three heroes' ends. The story of Jesus, just as the stories of Moses and Hercules, are bound by the same monomythic structure. They are all warriors, heroes, who challenge the authority of the Goddess. All three heroes "vanish" in the same way: presumably to take their place in the Heavens as either trophies of, or the ritual Kings to, the White Goddess suggesting her victory over patriarchal religions.

Graves' other work on the subject, *Jesus in Rome*, goes some way to explaining the political undertow to an otherwise, for Graves, archetypal mythic story. In *Jesus in Rome*, Graves and Podro argue that Jesus is saved from the cross and proceeds to Rome where he attempts to fulfil the prophesied duties of the Hebrew Messiah that he had missed in his hurry to force the Kingdom of God. The point of

this work is to suggest that Jesus was not, like Moses and Hercules, granted a hero's place in the Goddess' pantheon. Jesus had transgressed too far and was too deeply involved in the religion of the Father to become a Mother worshipper. What makes Jesus' tragedy even more pronounced, in light of Graves and Podro's work, is that Jesus, quite clearly, is demonstrated to be an outcast after the resurrection:

By Joshua's time, however, the Pauline Christian view that Jesus had preached against the Mosaic Law and against the Pharisees had made his name hateful to the Rabbis, and they could never have identified him with the Messiah. Nevertheless, the words and actions attributed to the Messiah in this anecdote¹⁷ seem to us so characteristic of Jesus, and of no other first- or second-century personage, that unless they are wholly fictitious we find it hard to ascribe them to anyone else. Jesus, the Gospels show, preached continuous preparedness for the moment when the expected Pangs of the

¹⁷ Graves and Podro quote a passage from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a):

... On the morrow, Joshua met with Elijah, who asked of him: 'What words did he speak unto thee?'

Joshua made answer: 'Verily, he spake falsehood.'

Elijah asked of him again: 'What falsehood?'

Joshua said: 'When I asked him saying: "When will my Lord come?" he made answer: "Today." Yet the Messiah did not come.'

Then said Elijah unto Joshua: 'His meaning was: "I will come *today*, if ye will hear God's voice."' [Graves and Podro's emphasis] (54-5)

Messiah would begin, the cataclysm would strike, and the faithful remnant of Israel would be gathered together for salvation. (55)

However, by this juncture in his career, Jesus, according to Graves and Podro was a mere accessory to the church which had been founded in his name. No tragedy could be greater, no fall from grace more complete than the one conferred upon Jesus by Robert Graves.

At least Claudius dies poisoned and betrayed but with the hope that future generations will remember him in the image that he has left for posterity—deceitful though that image might be. Belisarius dies, praised by his peers and restored to glory by the emperor whom he loved so much. Hercules dies, cheated of earthly success, but is raised to the heavens where he is promised eternity with the immortal Hebë. But Jesus is left without hope, without the religion he wanted, without his desperately desired Kingdom upon earth, forsaken by his Father and taunted by the Great Mother. His one outside chance for salvation is that he is granted his second coming. However, in order for that to happen, the Female, the mother Goddess, must first be vanquished. Given Graves' belief in the cyclical eternity of the struggle between matriarchy and patriarchy, neither will ever succeed; therefore, Graves' Jesus must wait for his time, for eternity.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

Perhaps the best way to begin a conclusion for a thesis which has sought to examine the development of the notion of the Gravesian hero from its roots is with a quotation from the beginning of the novel that ends the cycle. *Seven Days in New Crete*, published just three years after *King Jesus*, rejects the past as well as the present for its setting and takes place in the future. While the novel's setting is clearly futuristic and, therefore, of another genre from the majority of the works discussed here, the opening paragraph reveals a language which is recognisably Gravesian but at the same time, peculiarly self-conscious:

‘I am an authority on English,’ the man in the white suit said in a curiously colourless accent and with a good deal of hesitation, like an authority on Sanscrit trying to talk conversational Sanscrit. ‘I hope that you will pardon us for having brought you so far, i.e. so many generations ahead of your epoch. (1)

The man in the white suit, as the story reveals, is a “... student of European languages of the Late Christian epoch and an authority on the English language” (2). The first impression that the passage gives is that the man might be an autobiographical mockery of Graves himself. The man in the white suit, like Graves, is revealed to be

a lifelong devotee of the English language. He is its self-proclaimed authority who believed that he had mastered the tongue and written *the* last word on its history. *The White Goddess*, a book which purports to be just that, had only been published by Graves a year earlier.

The man in the white suit is also the only student of the language in a fictional time and place where a caste system has been adopted by a civilisation that praises and lives by the laws of the White Goddess. No one in the land, for example, duplicates the function of any other. All of society and every member in it has a function to fulfil, and no one desires to take or assume the role, property or wealth of any other. In fact, wealth and property have been eliminated. It is a communist utopia which is successful because money, greed, war and desire have been purged from the psyche of its people. The Cretan utopia, as Graves describes it, is a dull place.

The protagonist of the novel, Edward Venn-Thomas, is also its narrator. He has been teleported by the chief priestess of New Crete on the instruction of the Goddess because, as he is told of “one of [his] poems, viz. *Recantation* [the emphasis is in the text], happens to have survived to our day and you are known to have dwelt hereabouts” (3). With the allusion to poetry, the reader is made to realise that Venn-Thomas, and not the man in the white suit, is suggestive of Graves. The New Cretan landscape evokes images of Graves’ own Mallorcan village, and the reference to the poem, though not a title of one of Graves’ published poems, is enough to indicate that Venn-Thomas might be an emblematic reconstruction of Graves’ image of himself.

As Venn-Thomas explores New Crete and discovers its secrets, he realises why the Goddess has summoned him:

She summoned me from the past, a seed of trouble, since true love and wisdom spring only from calamity; and the first fruits of her sowing are the disasters that have emptied the Magic House at Horned Lamb. And this is the sign prophesied for her whirlwind, and its vortex will be the circle in which this storm-child and I now stand. You will be caught in that baleful gust, you will gasp and sicken, and carry the infection to every town and village in this kingdom; migrant birds and insects will carry it farther, to all the kingdoms of New Crete; and the symptoms of the infection will be an itching palm, narrowed eyes and a forked tongue. (279)

The New Cretans, Venn-Thomas realises, have systematised the Goddess' mythic teachings. Inspiration and desire have been eliminated in a world in which their poetry is treated as an inevitability rather than a surprise. He, and his "ancient" and "archaic" ideas then, are introduced into the New Cretan civilisation as a chaotic element destined to disrupt the order of society and to reintroduce uncertainty to a certain world.

Venn-Thomas, while the catalyst for change, is hardly its originator. He is merely a tool of the Goddess. In fact, there is no suggestion of Venn-Thomas being in the least heroic. In relation to the tragic legends of Hercules and Jesus, Venn-Thomas can be read as a comical figure. The confused mental state that he finds himself in when he is plucked from his own bed from his own time and projected into an alien future remains with him throughout the story. His wanderings through New Crete are not those of a gallant adventurer but rather of a bemused observer.

Venn-Thomas is, in relation to the heroes of Graves' fiction, entirely unhistorical. In other words, he is without history. The place of the novel bears no

relation to the place or the time that he is from beyond a few vaguely recognisable topographical features. Paradoxically, Venn-Thomas lives in the present even when he is in the future. Since the gap between his time and the time of the New Cretans is so profoundly long, he is a virtually inexplicable artefact. As such, the events from the passage of time between his day and that of New Cretan's is, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant. Venn-Thomas lives the moment of his future as though it were a dream, entirely unrelated to reality.

In this sense, as a form of futuristic history, *Seven Days in New Crete* marks a complete departure from Graves' former historical projects. Claudius, for example, wrote himself into legend knowing the necessary traits of the hero but lacking any of those traits himself. The historically ignorant Belisarius, for another example, became a pawn for his historians. Hercules also emerged as a tool for history because of the certainty of the truth of his attributes and mythological duties. Finally, Jesus, who embodies all of these traditions, fails the historical project most miserably because of the tragedy that in spite of his overly keen historical, mythological and heroic awareness he still neglected to recognise the part of the Goddess in the organisation of the universe. Venn-Thomas is denied all of these traits. The little history that he does know is irrelevant to the time in which he finds himself.

The irrelevance of the events of the past and the New Cretan's lack of a sense of history means that the poetry that they have so dutifully recorded has itself become meaningless. From this point-of-view, the failure of Graves' heroes parallels the New Cretans. In fact, their failure realises the importance of Graves' poetic project for a hero to possess a poetical language with a keen historical awareness that actualises the presence of the Goddess. Furthermore, the meaninglessness of poetry to the New

Cretans returns Graves' reader, metaphorically, to his criticisms of modern poets.

Just as Graves claimed that Shakespeare's verses were bowdlerised by his scholiasts who had neglected to maintain the historical temporality of Shakespeare's language when they transcribed his sonnets, Graves believed that the poets of his age were not thinking or writing poetically because they lacked the right sense of history.

Ultimately, it was through his own understanding of historical sense and the poet's historical role that Graves judged the poets of his day and, fictionally speaking, the poets of New Crete as well.

Quite clearly, given Graves' belief in the poet's historical duties, he considered the poet's task an heroic one. In *The White Goddess*, for example, he writes about the extraordinary requirements for an Irish bard to achieve the highest echelons of his calling and warrant the title of ollave:

The ollave in ancient Ireland had to be the master of one hundred and fifty Oghams, or verbal ciphers, which allowed him to converse with his fellow-poets over the heads of unlearned bystanders; to be able to repeat at a moment's notice any one of three hundred and fifty long traditional histories and romances, together with the incidental poems they contained, with appropriate harp accompaniment; to have memorized an immense number of other poems of different sorts; to be learned in philosophy; to be a doctor of civil law; to understand the history of modern, middle and ancient Irish with the derivations and changes of meaning of every word; to be skilled in music, augury, divination, medicine, mathematics, geography, universal history, astronomy, rhetoric and foreign languages; and to be able to extemporize poetry in fifty or more complicated metres. That anyone at all should have

been able to qualify as an ollave is surprising; yet families of ollaves tended to intermarry; and among the Maoris of New Zealand where a curiously similar system prevailed, the capacity of the ollave to memorise, comprehend, elucidate and extemporise staggered Governor Grey and other early British observers. (457)

The ollave was, it seems, the ultimate poet to Graves. The ollave's place in the community was as an intellectual and spiritual leader, but one who, as the use of the Ogham scripts suggests, remained aloof from the community which he served. Furthermore, since the ollave could bestow the status of legend, myth, or hero on an historical person or event, he was the ultimate arbiter for posterity and hence, must have seemed nearly a god.

In the introductory chapter to *The White Goddess*, "Poets and Gleemen", Graves laments the lack of poets with the training of Druidic bards and Irish ollaves in English society:

English poetry has had only a short experience of similar bardic discipline: the Classicism of the eighteenth century, when highly stylized diction and metre and 'decorum' of theme were insisted upon by the admirers and imitators of Alexander Pope. A violent reaction followed, the 'Romantic Revival'; then another partial return to discipline, Victorian Classicism; then a still more violent reaction, the 'modernistic' anarchy of the 1920's and 1930's. English poets now [1948] appear to be considering a voluntary return to discipline: not to the eighteenth-century strait-jacket, nor to the Victorian frock-coat, but to that logic of poetic thought which gives a poem strength and grace. But where can they study metre, diction, and theme? Where can they find any poetic

government to which they may yield a willing loyalty? Metre, they would all probably agree, is the norm to which a poet relates his personal rhythm, the original copybook copper-plate from which he gradually develops a unique personal handwriting; unless such a norm is assumed, his rhythmic idiosyncrasies are meaningless. They would also probably agree about diction, that it should be neither over-stylized nor vulgar. But what of theme? Who has ever been able to explain what theme is poetic and what is unpoetic, except by the effect that it has on the reader? (21)

Graves' book is the answer to the generation of poets that he is addressing with these introductory remarks. His careful reading and assessment of the poetic theme is to serve as their guide. However, Graves, like the ollave, has assumed and proclaimed the mastery of not only poetry but also, with his historical narratives, of the development of that theme throughout history. If the heroes of the past failed to learn history's lessons then, if Graves' all-consuming theory holds, their example can be used by the heroes and poets of today to ensure their own success—something which the New Cretans failed to do.

However, the question of how and why Graves came to associate the historical hero with the poet remains. Carlyle, in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, proposes that

Divinity and Prophet are past. We are now to see our Hero in the less ambitious, but also less questionable, character of Poet; a character which does not pass. The Poet is a heroic figure belonging to all ages; whom all ages possess, when once he is produced, whom the newest age as the oldest may produce;—and will produce, always when Nature pleases. Let Nature send a

Hero-soul; in no age is it other than possible that he may be shaped into a
Poet. (333)

Carlyle, as has been suggested earlier, was writing from a perspective when history was considered linear and the Great Men from her story were thought to have been the catalysts for history's progress. Graves' position could not be more antithetical. The poet's role, according to Graves, is supremely ambitious. While the poet is both prophet and divinity, he is also nothing but a pawn. However, he is not nature's pawn but a dutiful servant to his muse. The poet's sacrifice to the muse must always be absolute. If it is not, then the poet is not being true to his duty and cannot, like an ollave who does not complete his training, call himself a poet. Graves' historical heroes then, are like the failed poet. They have, dutifully undertaken a task but failed. Such figures are not history's "great men" but rather are her victims. The "great men" are, in fact, those poets who have succeeded in their training and whose historical legacy is evidenced by our knowledge of their historical records: the myths, legends and poems of the "heroes" of past times.

From Graves' earliest ventures into prose writing with his story of Moses and Elisha, his biography of T.E. Lawrence, and his own autobiography through to his last works of fiction that deal with the history of Jesus and then the futuristic *Seven Days in New Crete*, a steady development of the notion of the hero, the hero's place in history and the processes involved in recording his heroism can be traced. However, it is by touching upon his poetry, criticism and scholarship that the trace can, in fact, be seen in its full relief. Graves' comments regarding modernism and modernist poets begins to shift, in such light, from those of a recalcitrant and bitter outsider to an admiring though sceptical apologist. The modernists, according to Graves, fail for

the same reasons as Shakespeare's poetry has had its true meaning erased by his scribes, which is the same reason Claudius can write himself into history as a hero, which is the same reason that Belisarius becomes its fool, which is the same reason that Hercules suffers by its fates, which is the same reason that Jesus' project fails: they each invested their efforts on the wrong cause or failed to invest at all.

Appendix One

*A Chronology of the Major Works of Graves' Fiction Discussed in this Work*¹⁸

1925 - *My Head! My Head!* London: Martin Secker.

1927 - *Lawrence and the Arabs*. London: Jonathan Cape.

1929 - *The Shout*. London: Elkin Mathews & Marot.¹⁹

1929 - *Good-Bye to All That*. London: Jonathan Cape.

1934 - *I, Claudius*. London: Arthur Barker.

1934 - *Claudius the God*. London: Arthur Barker.

1938 - *Count Belisarius*. London: Cassell.

1944 - *The Golden Fleece*. London: Cassell. (Published as *Hercules, My Shipmate* in North America)

1946 - *King Jesus*. London: Cassell.

1949 - *Seven Days in New Crete*. London: Cassell.

¹⁸ All publication details listed here are taken from *Robert Graves: A Bibliography* compiled by Higginson and Williams in order to establish precise publication dates.

¹⁹ According to Martin Seymour-Smith, see above Chapter Three, *The Shout* was originally composed in 1924.

Appendix Two

Robert Graves' Works Currently in Print and Available at Major Booksellers.

Robert Graves' works that are in print and currently available in major book shops in the United Kingdom. The following list was compiled at a Waterstone's bookseller. Many of the titles listed below are issued by more than one publisher.

Over the next seven years the entire catalogue will grow as the Carcanet reissues of Graves' complete writings are printed and made available. However, even now, the bibliography of Graves' works in print is impressive.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, many more prose titles are in print than poetry. Though with Carcanet's *Complete Poems* (edited by Dunstan Ward and Beryl Graves) now having appeared, all of Graves' published poetry (as well as some unpublished work) is now available to readers and scholars.

Prose Titles

I, Claudius

Claudius the God

Count Belisarius

The Greek Myths, Volume One

The Greek Myths, Volume Two

Good-Bye to All That

Collected Short Stories

Complete Short Stories

The White Goddess

Complete Writings on Poetry

The Long Weekend: A Social History

God of Olympus

Selected Letters Volume One

Selected Letters Volume Two

Lawrence and the Arabs

Ancient Castle

Cynics and Romantics

Poetry Titles

Selected Poems

Centenary Selected Poems

Complete Poems Volume One

Complete Poems Volume Two

Complete Poems Volume Three

Translations

The Twelve Caesars

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