**Graves, Robert (1895–1985)**

Robert Graves was a prolific poet and novelist whose career began with the semi-autobiographical *Good-bye to All That* (1929) but who became famous after the publication and BBC adaptation of *I, Claudius* (1934). He was not affiliated with a major literary movement, though many of his works, such as “In Broken Images” (1929), respond to similar modernist concerns as *THE WASTE LAND* (1922). He had little regard for poets like EZRA POUND and W.B. YEATS, despite the interest in mythology that he shared with Yeats, D.H. LAWRENCE, and H.D. He was a careful formal craftsman concerned with revision and the preservation of traditional forms, such as the Welsh *cynghanedd.* Both love and war figure prominently throughout his poetry and prose, particularly in his myth of the White Goddess.

Growing up, Graves’s German mother and Anglo-Irish father, along with vacations to Wales, helped him to develop a multicultural perspective. He attended public school at Charterhouse, where his mentor, mountaineer George Mallory, introduced him to EDWARD MARSH. At 19, he took a commission with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and left for France as a second lieutenant. In the trenches, he wrote his first book of poetry, *Over the Brazier* (1916), and developed friendships with war poets like SIEGFRIED SASSOON. While fighting in the Battle of the Somme, he was wounded so severely that *The Times* reported him dead, and though he returned to France, he was quickly sent back to Britain. As he recovered, he was treated by psychologist W.H.R. RIVERS with Sassoon and WILFRED OWEN. These wartime experiences are visible throughout his *oeuvre*, but they figure most prominently in *Good-bye to All That,* one of the most literary and comic war memoirs.

After marrying Nancy Nicholson (1918), he took a B.Litt. at Oxford, and his thesis was published as *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (1925). He moved his family to Cairo after completing this degree, teaching for a year at the Royal Egyptian University. American poet LAURA RIDING joined them there, and Graves left his wife for her after returning from Cairo. Riding significantly influenced Graves’s work, fueling his desire for continuous revision and helping him to shape the feminine figure that would become the White Goddess. Together, they published several works, including *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*(1927) and *No Decency Left* (1932). In 1929, they moved to Majorca where Graves wrote his popular historical novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina* (1934). Throughout his career, Graves published many other historical novels, such as *Count Belisarius* (1938) and *They Hanged My Saintly Billy* (1957). Riding left Graves for fellow poet SCHUYLER JACKSON in 1939, and he remarried in 1950.

The critical work for which Graves is best recognized is *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), in which he emphasized love and myth’s importance to literature. He based his White Goddess on the Mediterranean Triple Goddess—who took the form of a maiden, woman, and crone—and the Western European moon goddess. She later appeared in texts like *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (1965) and the collection *Man Does, Woman Is* (1964), for which a variety of women served as her mortal incarnation.

During his career, Graves received many awards, including an honorary M.A. from Oxford (1961) and the Queen’s Medal for Poetry (1968). He returned to Majorca in 1946, where he lived with his family until his death in 1985.

**References and Further Reading:**

* Graves, Richard Percival. (1986). *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926*. New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books.
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* Seymour, Miranda. (1995). *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge.* New York: Holt.
* Seymour-Smith, Martin. (1995). *Robert Graves: His Life and Works*. Revised ed. London: Bloomsbury

**Selected Bibliography**

**Poetry:**

* *Over the Brazier* (1916)
* *Country Sentiment* (1920)
* *Whipperginny* (1923)
* *Collected Poems* (1938, 1948, 1955, 1961, 1965, 1975)
* *Man Does, Woman Is* (1964)
* *Love Respelt* (1964)
* *At the Gate* (1974)

**Novels:**

* *Good-Bye to All That: An Autobiography* (1929; revised edition, 1957)
* *I, Claudius* (1934)
* *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina* (1934)
* *Count Belisarius* (1938)
* *Sergeant Lamb of the Ninth* (1940)
* *The Story of Marie Powell, Wife to Mr. Milton* (1943)
* *The Golden Fleece* (1944)
* *They Hanged My Saintly Billy* (1957)

**Critical Work:**

* *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (1925)
* *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948)
* *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry, 1922-1949* (1949)
* *On Poetry: Collected Talks and Essays* (1969)

**Letters**:

* O’Prey, Paul. (1984). *Between Moon and Moon: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1946-1972.* London: Hutchinson.
* O’Prey, Paul, ed. (1982). *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914-1946.* London: Hutchinson.

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**Possible Images to Accompany Entry:**

* Robert Graves in his Royal Welch Fusiliers uniform (Richard Percival Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926*, insert between 232-233)
* Robert Graves at his house in Majorca (Richard Percival Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess, 1940-1985,* insert between 298-299)