

‘THE NEEDLE DIPS AND POKES’: GRAVES, CHILDHOOD AND PSYCHOANALYSIS¹

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‘The Patchwork Bonnet’, from which my title comes, and ‘The Sweet-shop Round the Corner’ are poems written several decades apart. Yet both are brilliantly observed episodes of emotional or psychical separation between children and their mothers, and attest to Robert Graves’s enduring sensitivity to such scenes. Graves’s sensitivity is his own, but it was surely influenced and aided by an enduring relationship with psychoanalytic thought. My aim here will be to set a context for Graves’s early interest in psychoanalytic ideas and show how, in essence, these continued to influence his writing, albeit in a disguised form, over many years. After a brief review of Graves’s developing poetics I will show, through an analysis of ‘A Patchwork Bonnet’, the depth of Graves’s absorption of psychodynamic ideas into his own poetic mode. In this poem lies a record of Graves’s early theories of critical production, which are, as Paul O’Prey suggests, both ‘remarkable’ and ‘radical’ for the time (Graves 1995: viii), but also the rudiments of the later direction he was to take. Graves is already here gathering the fragments of postwar identity, revising notions of time, memory and identity and showing how the social influences of the early 1920s express themselves in personal history – which is his particular contribution to modernism.

Graves began his career at the time when the ideas of Freud and psychoanalysis were becoming more widely known in England and began to have a marked influence upon writers such as Conrad, Henry James, Joyce, Woolf, Hilda Doolittle, and Eliot. Moreover, Graves’s interests were the interests of the early psychoanalysts, particularly Freud and Jung: anthropology and mythology, dreams and a belief in dynamic, unconscious processes. The broader term *psychodynamic* pertains to mental action, since *psycho* relates to the mind while *dynamic* relates to powerful forces that are not in equilibrium. Thus the mind is seen as prone to

¹ Original publication: Nicholson, C. (2012). ‘The needle dips and pokes’: Graves, Childhood and Psychoanalysis’ *Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society* 3: 490-504.

powerful and opposed tensions between, for example, inner and outer reality, thought and emotion, conscious and unconscious, past and present, desire for closeness with others and the urge toward autonomy, with these tensions creating conflict and pain in the individual (Nicholson, Irwin and Dwivedi 2010). Graves's own approach to poetry, as we shall see, is embedded in this psychoanalytic tradition.

Yet Graves's later attitude to psychoanalysis was disdainful. In his address to the New York Y.M.C.A. in 1957 he defends himself against Jarrell's view that the White Goddess is a projection of Graves's 'unconscious on the universe' (Bloom 1987: 26). In a typically ingenious reversal, Graves claims that Freud is the one whose theories are a projection: 'Freud, indeed, never realised to his dying day that he was projecting a private fantasy on the world, and then making it stick by insisting that his disciples must undergo prolonged psycho-analytic treatment until they surrendered and saw the light.' (Graves 1997: 495-96). Given this attitude, not an altogether erroneous one, it is not surprising that Graves contributed a chapter to William Sargant's book *Battle for the Mind* (1959) about the history of psychological indoctrination. The connection between psychoanalysis and indoctrination is still discussed by psychoanalysts. Patrick Casement, for example, writes that

the nature of mental change achieved in this way is sometimes similar to that of a conversion, patients giving up one way of seeing themselves for another that is authoritatively transmitted to them by the analyst. A transformed view of the internal world, in this kind of analysis, is sometimes conveyed by a process not so very different from indoctrination, whereby patients take on the mind and thinking of another person in place of their mind.

Casement 2002: xiii

But this is a limited account of the therapeutic process and applies only to a slim spectrum of practicing therapists, as Casement makes clear. Certainly, this is untrue of Graves's friend W. H. R. Rivers, whose practice at Craiglockhart was remarkably progressive and non-dogmatic. Graves had known Rivers since 1917, gradually coming more and more under his influence. By 1921 he was visiting Rivers regularly in Cambridge, where they discussed Graves's state of mind and the principles of morbid psychology (Graves 1929: 105-6). He refers to *On English Poetry* in a letter to Blunden in March 1921 as a 'six times rewritten [...] book on poetry which is now being taken to Cambridge to be vetted with its author by Dr Rivers of St John's – the greatest living psychologist. Or so people say' (Graves 1988: 123).

But Graves was fiercely independent. Rather than engage in formal therapy, his early work *On English Poetry* (1922) incorporates a psychoanalytic structure (Graves 1922). Here, poetry itself is seen as resulting from a form of internal conflict that requires reconciliation. Graves's ideas are consistent with those the psychologist Leon Festinger put forward and developed over thirty years later in 1957. Festinger attempts to describe how people cope with a form of internal conflict which he calls 'cognitive dissonance'. His theory of 'cognitive dissonance' is based on the observation that human beings are unable to tolerate psychological inconsistency. The existence of dissonance, he writes, 'being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance' (Festinger 1957: 2-3, 29-31). Festinger gives a number of strategies for achieving this, but for Graves, this reconciliation comes about only if the poet enters a trance-like state or a waking dream where conscious defences are relaxed. Graves, through the influence of Rivers, postulates a poetic method that is psychoanalytic at root since it derives from a dynamic model of the internal world. His best poetry shows that he was particularly susceptible and responsive to the energies and pressures existing between conflictive and contradictory tensions.

In his early attempt at self-healing through poetry, the closest Graves comes to acknowledging the difficulties in his early childhood is a statement made in *On English Poetry*. Graves writes that: 'A poet in the fullest sense is one whom some *unusual complications of early environment or mixed parentage* develop as an intermediary between the small-group consciousness of particularly sects, clans, castes, types and professions among whom he moves' (Graves 1922; my italics). In the phrase 'unusual complications of early environment' lies a covert reference to his own childhood, in which illness, accidents, separation and a lack of continuity appeared to be the norm. Graves is generally seen as moving beyond a psychoanalytic model, mainly because of his own disavowal of this influence in critical texts such as the introduction to *The Common Asphodel* (Graves 1949: 3) and the 1957 New York address noted above. However, I am arguing that the essence of this theory is retained in a gradually refined form and that a psychoanalytic influence can be tracked through his later critical works. Most notably, Graves's view of being an 'intermediary' between groups re-emerges in *The White Goddess*, where he strives for synthesis between disciplines and integrity in the development of his world view (Graves 1997: 218).

These notions about poetry, however, predate psychoanalysis. The description by Keats of '*Negative Capability*,' that is, 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries,

doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 1817), is one antecedent of Graves's theory. For Keats, poetry is 'capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with beauty & truth', while for the young Graves the unconscious reconciliation of the same 'disagreeables' is the social and personal cathartic function of poetry. Keats also describes in a letter to Richard Woodhouse how the identity of the poet is displaced into the objects and people around him. He writes that 'a poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body – The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse and have about them an unchangeable attribute' (Abrams 1993: 830, 836). Keats, like Graves, appears to have an overwhelming sympathetic identification with sensible objects, including people. Rimbaud, in a letter to Paul Demeny dated May 1871, arrives at a similar view. He writes about how the poet 'makes himself a visionary through a long, boundless, and systematized *disorganisation of all the senses.*' Rimbaud essentially suggests that 'the unknown' is attainable by becoming 'absorbed into everything' (Rimbaud 1994: 276). In the experience that both writers describe, to use Freudian terminology, the ego is displaced and fragmented through a range of identifications with people and events surrounding one's self. This eventually leads to a build up of internal pressure ending in a new synthesis, or in Graves's terms, the solution to an emotional problem in the form of a poem. These unsophisticated, incomplete ideas represent theories of poetry that involve moving from emotional and intellectual confusion, fragmentation, and disconnection to understanding and integration.

Many poets have attributed to the purpose and function of poetry the reconciliation of disparate elements. In *The Fire and the Fountain*, his study of poetic inspiration, John Press describes the development of this idea. Press writes that 'Assimilation of diverse experiences, followed by a fusion of disparate elements and their transmutation into poetry – such is the nature of the poetic process.' He quotes Wordsworth, Rilke, Coleridge and Eliot, who all discuss this notion. For Coleridge, for example, poetry 'diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each' and through imagination, 'reveals itself in the balance or reconcilment of opposite or discordant qualities' (Press 1955: 223). Graves, though, is the first writer to have so thoroughly elaborated upon this theory, applied it broadly and based it upon a *then* new psychoanalytic view of mental processes.

Indeed, in the chapter 'My Name Is Legion' of *On English Poetry*, and particularly on p. 119, it is clear that Graves sees identity not as unitary entity but as inhabited by multiple selves

who take their origin from the complications in early family life and from identifications with contradictory social groups whom one later encounters. There are two conclusions to be drawn from this. The first is that, arguably, Graves anticipates the ‘object relations’ school of the late 1920s and 30s, psychoanalysts led by Melanie Klein who see external objects (parents and other significant relationships) becoming internalised aspects of a person. The second is that Graves is channelling and attempting to come to terms with many of the social tensions and changes of modernity faced in post-war Britain of the early 1920s.

How does Graves gradually refine his attitude to poetry? Initially this attitude involved an implicit acknowledgement of the difficulties in his early childhood, as noted earlier. He writes: ‘I regarded poetry as, first, a personal cathartic for the poet suffering from some inner conflict’ (Graves 1929: 291). He relates in *On English Poetry* how a sympathetic, intuitive identification with aspects of each sect or group means that ‘the wide diffusion of his loyalties makes him everywhere a hypocrite and a traitor’ (Graves 1922: 123). Poetry derived from the internal struggle of these sub-groups for reconciliation.

Three years after *On English Poetry*, in *Poetic Unreason*, Graves retains the essentials of this view, but the explicit psychoanalytic element has been diluted: ‘Poetry is for the poet a means of informing himself on many planes simultaneously, the plane of imagery, the intellectual plane, the musical plane of rhythmical structure and texture – of informing himself on these and possibly on other distinguishable planes of the relation in his mind of certain hitherto inharmonious interests or other selves’ (Graves 1925: 1). Although Graves gradually revised his view, ensuring it was far more independent of psychoanalytic concepts, the influence remained implicit. In ‘The Poet in a Valley of Dry Bones’, written thirty-five years later for his Oxford lecture series of 1962, Graves retains the sense of conflicting experience becoming reconciled. He writes:

The Vienna school of psychology presumes a conscious and unconscious mind as two separate and usually warring entities; but a poet cannot accept this. In the poetic trance, he has access not only to the primitive emotions and thoughts which lie stored in his childhood memory, but to all his subsequent experience – emotional and intellectual; including a wide range of English won by constant critical study.

Graves 1961: 89

Echoing his earlier writing about being ‘an intermediary between the small-group consciousness’ of various factions, Graves now suggests that upon re-reading the poem after sleeping ‘soon he is back in the trance, [and] finds that his mind has been active while he was asleep on the problem of *internal relations*, and that he can substitute the exact right word for the stand-in with which he had to be content the night before’ (Graves 1961, my italics). The term ‘internal relations’ here could refer equally to the relations between the variety of experiences of which the poem is composed, or to the internal relation of individual words within the poem. Graves was never to work out completely a theoretical approach to poetry. Nevertheless, both senses of meaning implicit in this passage attest to the enduring psychological need for Graves to integrate, reconcile and synthesise the disparate aspects of his internal world. Gradually becoming less psychoanalytic, his poetry remained psychodynamic.

And it is difficult to see how it could have been otherwise. His early life was characterised by separation, deracination, injury, guilt and fragmentation, which culminated in the First World War with severe wounds. Such a history naturally left Graves with a need to trace his origins, to recapitulate, striving for integration and reconciliation through the writing of *Good-bye to All That*. Since Graves repressed memories and feelings that were too painful to address at this stage, the attempt was unsuccessful. However, in *The Shout* (1929) and in the poems written between the years 1916 and 1951 he repeatedly reverts to certain themes and images as a mode of meditating, in a recuperative way, upon his early experience. The disturbance in Graves’s identity forces him, through trauma, to revisit his childhood in the hope of finding peace, certainty and an escape from his traumatised state of mind. The result, however, is that the very same trauma reawakens dark and sinister memories and perceptions that, due to Graves’s sensitivity and childhood experiences, are already lurking there. ‘The First Funeral’, ‘A Child’s Nightmare’, and ‘The Picture Book’ describe this process.

For now, I want to look at a single, critically neglected poem from the 1921 volume *The Pier-Glass*, which captures Graves’s relationship with psychoanalytic ideas. ‘The Patchwork Bonnet’ (Graves 2000: 110-11) displays a keen interest in a moment of disconnection between mother and child, which could be seen to reflect Graves’s own experience, for example, the generational, emotional and, at the age of four, actual separation from his parents due to illness. Nevertheless, the quality of attention paid by Graves to this scene is undoubtedly the influence of psychoanalytic thought.

The poem has not received the critical attention it deserves. Written at a time when Graves, in contrast to Eliot and the early modernists, was still seen as struggling to break free of his Georgian roots, it is too easily dismissed, described as suffering from ‘the cloying elements of sentimental escapism’ (Quinn 1994: 79). As it appears, this critical reaction stands as an apt demonstration of Graves’s reading of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and all he learned by reading the works of Rivers and his colleague Henry Head. As Graves wrote in 1929, ‘I was trying to show the nature of the supra-logical element. It was only, I wrote, to be fully understood by close analysis of the latent association of the words used; the obvious prose meaning was often in direct opposition to the latent content’ (Graves 1929: 292). While at the first reading the ostensible subject matter, the sewing of a baby’s bonnet, does tend to preclude closer scrutiny, in fact, ‘The Patchwork Bonnet’ is an example, even at this early stage, of Graves producing disciplined, compact, measured, dynamic poetry. This, though not emotionally profuse, filters into the reader’s consciousness powerfully with successive readings, anchoring Graves, in my view, as a counterweight to the high-Modernist poetics of that time. Dating from 1921, with its conflicting images of womanhood and interest in the synthesis of internalised experience, this may also be one of his earliest poems containing substantial elements of *The White Goddess*.

Across the room my silent love I throw,
Where you sit sewing in bed by candlelight,
Your young stern profile and industrious fingers
Displayed against the blind in a shadow show,
To Dinda’s grave delight.

The needle dips and pokes, the cheerful thread
Runs after, follow-my-leader down the seam:
The patchwork pieces cry for joy together,
O soon to sit as a crown on Dinda’s head,
Fulfilment of their dream.

Snippets and odd ends folded by, forgotten,
With camphor on a top shelf, hard to find,
Now wake to this most happy resurrection,
To Dinda playing toss with a reel of cotton
And staring at the blind.

Dinda in sing-song stretching out one hand
Calls for the playthings; mother does not hear:
Her mind sails far away on a patchwork Ocean,
And all the world must wait till she touches land,
So Dinda cries in fear,

Then Mother turns, laughing like a young fairy,
And Dinda smiles to see her look so kind,
Calls out again for playthings, playthings, playthings,
And now the shadows make an Umbrian '*Mary
Adoring*', on the blind.

This poem is about how variegated, patchy experiences make up one's identity and how early experiences of the mother can lead to integration or fragmentation. The theme is introduced in the first line with the observer *throwing* his love 'Across the room'. His disconnection from the infant's mother conditions the state of mind in which these 'patches' of observation are seen. The poem itself is a patchwork – since typographically, if laid side to side the stanzas would interlink perfectly. The joining up of experience, as the mother sews, identifies her central role in the infant's development. The dipping and poking evokes the child's playfulness as the thread, that will become her life, runs 'follow-my-leader down the seam', of both conscious and unconscious experience. The mother, represented by the needle, is the infant's 'leader', while the 'seam' holds all the experiences together, but also separates them, just as each unrhymed third line separates and connects each stanza.

The 'patchwork pieces' of experience 'cry for joy together' and both crying and joy become 'a crown on Dinda's head', in other words, are aspects of experience that will make up the components of Dinda's identity. Foreexample, Dinda will internalise very distinct images of her mother – the same ones Graves as the observer sees in Nancy, his model for this poem². In the first stanza the mother is seen with a 'stern profile and industrious fingers' to which Dinda responds uncertainly with 'grave delight'. In the last stanza she is seen 'laughing like a young fairy' and then as '*Mary Adoring*'. Yet these images are not objectively fixed but rather 'seen', in stanzas one, three and five, 'against the blind', suggestive of the 'patchwork Ocean' of the

² Nancy Nicholson, Graves's first wife; they were married on 23 January 1918.

unconscious and unknown across which, as in the first line, we precariously communicate our love along with, perhaps, other less pleasant kinds of feeling.

The first two lines of the third stanza describe how memories are ‘hard to find’, the ‘snippets and odd ends’ are ‘forgotten, / With camphor on a top shelf’, suggesting that memories associated with curious aromas though buried deep can be evoked years later. Alternatively, the camphor connotes mothballs, suggesting that these ‘snippets and odd ends’ have been put on an out-of-the-way shelf with that protection. Indeed, there may be a self-reference here, as Graves seems to be remembering a scene evoked by Dinda, or some other child, playing. These memories ‘hard to find’, he writes, ‘Now wake to this most happy resurrection’. The snippets of memory, the odds and ends of infancy and childhood are carefully preserved by Graves ready to be brought down and reassembled in new patterns when the need arises – a process that seems to culminate in *The White Goddess* years later.

In the last three stanzas, we arrive at the central action to which the poem has been building. The mother’s mind is seen to drift, losing its attentive preoccupation with the infant ‘playing toss with a reel of cotton’. The infant, needing attachment ‘stretches out one hand’, but sensing the mother’s mental absence, ‘cries in fear’, which brings the mother’s mindful attention back. The year before this poem was written Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), described just this game with a cotton reel known now by the German words *fort / da*: ‘*fort*’ meaning ‘gone’, when the reel is tossed away by the infant into his curtained cot, and ‘*da*’ meaning ‘there’, as it is pulled back and reappears. In this way, through such a game, Freud saw the infant coming to terms with the momentary loss of its mother through play, so enabling the introduction and adjustment to separation. In his interpretation of this game Freud suggests a number of impulses being at work, the first having a rather darker intent than may first appear: when the infant throws the object the purpose is to ‘revenge himself on his mother for going away from him’ (since the object in the game represents the mother) (Freud 1920: 224-26). But what might have interested Graves is that Freud here draws a relationship between war neurosis and children’s play. The child is compelled to repeat the moment of separation from his mother in the game described above just as the traumatised soldier repeats in the dreams and tremors of shell shock the moment of his wounding or fright. In effect, Freud argues that in repeating painful experiences in both cases, the child’s game and the soldier’s symptoms of war neurosis, lies an attempt ‘to master the stimulus retrospectively’ (Freud 1920: 139-243). Probably, Graves heard about Freud’s observations from Rivers; nevertheless, the poem’s dense concatenation of experiences related to the theme of separation

and identity shows how deeply psychoanalytic ideas are explored by Graves. Moreover, entering so fully into these ideas and transmuting them into poetry, leaving this subtle, questioning, poised scene, is Graves's especial capacity.

The psychiatrist Sir Michael Rutter suggests that 'unhappy separations may sometimes lead to clinging behaviour lasting many months or even a year or so. These experiences may also render the child more likely to be distressed by separation when older' (Rutter 1991: 83). This view is certainly shared by Margot Waddell, a psychoanalyst, whose book *Inside Lives* (1998) discusses the effects of separation on the growth of personality. Waddell writes: 'The locus of this struggle, whether in the four-year-old, the fourteen-year-old, the forty-year-old or the eighty-year-old, characteristically becomes the triangular relationship in which, over and over again, these matters of love, hate, possession and separation have to be negotiated' (Waddell 2002: 65). Graves, later, tended to describe relationships in this triangular manner, referring to 'the Star-Son, [and] his hated rival [...] the Serpent who succeed each other in 'the Moon-woman's favour' (Graves 1997: 379). Certainly, issues of 'love, hate, [and] possession' were a preoccupation of Graves's during his later life and suffuse much of his later poetry.

The closing stanza of 'The Patchwork Bonnet' observes the mother's gaze upon the infant, her 'look so kind', with the closing lines: 'And now the shadows make an Umbrian *'Mary / Adoring'* on the blind.' This recalls the opening image in which the mother is *seen* 'by candlelight' juxtaposed with 'a shadow show' seen on the blind. The shadow and ideal image relate to but are not the same as *the* 'Mother', which has a capital M to signify the definite article.

The ambiguity of the mother's gaze, both stern and smiling, and the possibility of its painful absence are well described. Roughly forty years later, Graves's poem 'The Three-Faced', from the 1964 volume *Man Does, Woman Is*, describes a different but related gaze:

Who calls her two-faced? Faces, she has three:
The first inscrutable, for the outer world;
The second shrouded in self-contemplation;
The third, her face of love,
Once for an endless moment turned on me.

Asking whose face this is, Kenneth Wright in *Vision and Separation* (1991) dismisses the

possibility that the face belongs to ‘the poet’s current mistress’ because ‘something has been added that seems to take the experience out of the mere prosaic present’, which he sees in ‘the word *endless*’ introducing a sense of ‘something timeless and eternal’. Noting the possible Jungian archetypal features, Wright prefers to view this face differently:

The heightened significance suggests an aura of long-forgotten, and now half-remembered, imagery, the face of the loved object appearing not only in its own right, but representing elements from preverbal memory, when the mother’s face filled the child’s world with radiance and adoration.

Wright 1991: 17

‘The Three-Faced’ does perhaps relate to early experience. Yet the face that ‘filled the child’s world with radiance and adoration’ is the ‘*Mary Adoring*’ that Graves brings into question in ‘The Patchwork Bonnet’. More likely, due to Graves’s poor attachment to his parents, his sense of loss and separation, he constantly sought to establish an attachment that would be reparative, bringing longed-for peace. The desire for this was dramatically increased by his further deracination in the First World War from both his family and culture. The face ‘for an endless moment turned on me’ is the one Graves *did not* see as a child, as well as the timeless face that confers both the blessing of love and inspiration, that of the Muse.

Conclusion: A shining space

Walk between dark and dark – a shining space
With the grave’s narrowness, though not its peace.
(‘Sick Love’)

In this paper I have argued that the influence of psychoanalytic ideas is not restricted to Graves’s early poetry and theory but that its influence was, rather, a lasting one. Through later revisions to his theory of poetic production Graves was able to disguise but not entirely expunge the traces of this early and powerful influence.

The idea that poetic inspiration is a mode of reconciling discordant elements is hardly new. It can be seen widely in Romantic poets, was loosely theorised by Keats, and can be seen later in Rimbaud and Eliot. However, Graves’s development of these ideas, set as it was in the context of his confrontation with war neuroses and emerging psychoanalytic ideas, was at this time an entirely unique and paradoxically personal grappling with the tensions and

conflicts of modernity. While 'The Patchwork Bonnet' may not quite be modernist, it certainly is not Georgian since it is idealistic sentimentalism of that period that it rigorously brings into question.

While Graves's poetry moved away from psychoanalytic concepts, it remained psychodynamic, since his poetry comes out of the 'space between' the opposing tensions, the conflicts originating in early life and society. This space 'between' opposing elements goes back for its origin to *On English Poetry*, where the 'conflict' Graves describes eventually inspires a poem of reconciliation. From the poem 'Sick Love' I might call this place 'a shining space'; in my view it is Graves's poetic transformation of 'No Man's Land', where, under a bright moon, he had to walk or crawl between the 'dark and dark' of the British and German trenches³. This space, then, is a place of rarefied experience and increased magnitude where he appears to function at his poetic best, as in 'Full Moon', 'Sick Love', 'Time', and 'Counting the Beats'. Despite his later very different attitude to psychoanalytic ideas, ultimately, for Graves, as in 'The Patchwork Bonnet', poetry continued to be the tense seam that held disparate elements of his internal world gracefully and dynamically together.

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³ *Good-bye to All That* (1929: 130).

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