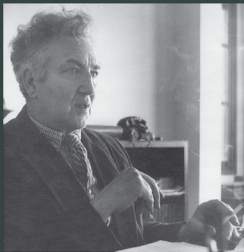


Edited by A. G. G. GIBSON

ROBERT GRAVES & THE CLASSICAL TRADITION



CLASSICAL PRESENCES

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CLASSICAL PRESENCES

Attempts to receive the texts, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome inevitably run the risk of appropriating the past in order to authenticate the present. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over the centuries allows us to trace the avowal and disavowal of values and identities, old and new. *Classical Presences* brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.

Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition

Edited by
A. G. G. GIBSON

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The citations in this collection from Robert Graves's literary work are by kind permission of Carcanet Press; although the references have been cited from numerous older editions, they can be found in the following volumes, *Collected Writings on Poetry*; *Complete Poems* vols. 1–3; *Count Belisarius and Lawrence and the Arabs*; *Translating Rome*; *The Golden Fleece and Seven Days in New Crete*; *Goodbye to All That and Other Great War Writings*; *Greek Myths*; *Homer's Daughter and The Anger of Achilles*; *I, Claudius and Claudius the God*; *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*; and *The White Goddess*. The electronic and online copyright consent is by kind permission of A.P. Watt Literary Agency.

The cover image is a previously unpublished photograph of Robert Graves in Majorca, taken about the time of writing *The Greek Myths* for Penguin, and it is reproduced from the private collection by kind permission of William Graves.

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Introduction

A. G. G. Gibson

In 1965 Malcolm Muggeridge gave a personal and contemporary view of Robert Graves in a preview for a forthcoming interview to be broadcast on the *Intimations* television programme:

Several times our paths have vaguely crossed.

In my opinion, he is, without any question, the most distinguished practitioner of English letters now living. His output has been prodigious, but none of it is insignificant. Besides being a poet, he is a highly original if unorthodox scholar; a critic, blessedly free of pedantry, a novelist, an essayist, and, in his Claudius books, a popular writer with a following all over the world.

Graves has had the courage and the resolution to live his own way on his own terms, without reference to, or involvement in, the political and moral controversies which have submerged so many writers and poets in our time. In his Majorca retreat he has managed to be an observer rather than a participant; as though the tragic experience of participating as a very young man in the savage buffooneries of war sufficed for a whole lifetime.¹

In 2010 I was reminded of Robert Graves's continued visibility on a visit to the National Gallery of Scotland, where I happened across a number of Faber & Faber copies of *The White Goddess* in the Gallery shop. This edition was placed alongside art books on subjects as diverse as Robert Mapplethorpe, Goya, Hendrick Golzius, Vermeer, and Christen Købke. It is striking that the poet and author Robert Graves seems to remain in the popular intellectual consciousness of

¹ Muggeridge (1965).

the twenty-first century, even if this tends to be mainly through *The White Goddess* or his novels, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* (the novels having been given additional prominence through the critically acclaimed BBC television adaptation). One would hesitate to argue that, outside of his poetry, the bulk of Graves's work is 'mainstream', and that through these books in particular he entered the popular culture of the twentieth century.

An extended period spent researching the life of Claudius eventually provoked the initiative to examine further Graves's work in Classics, and this was brought to fruition in a series of workshops, 'Classics and Robert Graves: A Relationship in Literature, Translation and Adaptation', at the University of St Andrews.² The workshops were to consider the reception and adaptation of Graves's novels for film; his impact via Classics on twentieth-century poetry; his translations from Latin into English; his perception of Greek myth; and the historical novel; however, Graves's books for children are not included in this collection. Other conferences and edited papers have addressed wider issues around Graves's poetry and literature, but this was an opportunity for the relationship between Classics itself and the body of his work to be revisited and reviewed within an interdisciplinary framework. The research material available on Graves is improving. St John's College, Oxford, has an extensive and fascinating collection of papers from Majorca, and the annotated online diaries (1935–9) on the University of Victoria website are a highly useful resource. In addition there are biographies and a complete collection of poetry and novels, as well as collections of Graves's letters and essays.³ As more material becomes accessible it will allow for more cross-disciplinary studies to be attempted. This collection marks an initial step along that path.

There are a number of impressive biographies of Robert Graves in existence (see the Bibliography), so the following paragraphs will provide only a light biographical sketch. Robert von Ranke Graves was born in London in 1895, son to Alfred Perceval Graves and Amalia

² There were three research workshops, held at the University of St Andrews on 19 September, 31 October, and 21 November 2009 respectively; these were hosted through the generous support of the School of Classics, University of St Andrews.

³ The Robert Graves Trust has excellent research resources at <<http://www.robertgraves.org/trust/index.php>> and the Poetry Foundation has a short biography and extensive bibliography at <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-graves>> (accessed 21/05/2011).

von Ranke. His mother was a great-niece of Leopold von Ranke, an eminent nineteenth-century German historian whose methodology allowed general theories to be constructed from empirical research on the primary sources. Von Ranke's aim was simply 'to see things how they really are',⁴ an aspiration, it could be argued, that would be echoed later by Graves in his literary re-creations of 'historical' events.

After attending Charterhouse School, Graves enlisted in the Welch Fusiliers at the outset of World War I and served in France from 1915 to 1917. He was wounded at the Somme in 1916; during his war service he met the poet Siegfried Sassoon, and on his eventual return to England in 1917 he went up to St John's College, Oxford, where he would become a friend of T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence would become a major influence on Graves's life until the former's untimely death. Graves wrote about his friend in *Lawrence and the Arabs*, as well as collaborating with Basil Liddell Hart on publishing their respective correspondence with, in their minds, this inspirational hero figure.⁵ In 1918 Graves married the painter Nancy Nicholson, sister of sculptor Ben Nicholson, and settled into a life of bohemian domesticity, first in Oxford, in a house rented from John Masefield, then in London. Graves invited the American poet and writer Laura Riding to work with him on a book on modern poetry, and after a brief sojourn in Egypt in 1926, where Graves taught at the University of Cairo, their theatrical affair developed. It was itself interwoven with other non-conformist relationships, and after a gothic denouement Graves finally abandoned Nancy and their four children for Laura in 1929.⁶ Around this time Graves had finished his controversial war autobiography, *Good-bye to All That*, and so he felt free to leave England with Laura that October for a new home in Deyà, Majorca. It was here that he produced many of his works connected to Classics. The initial results were *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, historical novels that Graves considered to be purely literary potboilers. It gives some indication of Graves's work ethic, or perhaps points to the severity of his financial situation, that both novels were published in 1934. Graves and Riding had to leave Majorca with the onset of the Spanish Civil War, and returned to England. He continued to write, and followed the tales of Claudius with a further historical novel, *Count Belisarius*, before venturing into the realms of myth with *The Golden*

⁴ Seymour (1995), 4; see Seymour-Smith (1995), 1–11 of 1982 edn. for the family backgrounds in literature, history, and the clergy.

⁵ R. P. Graves (1990), 51–6, 229–31.

⁶ Seymour-Smith (1995), 122 ff.

Fleece, published in the United States as *Hercules My Shipmate*. A contemporary review in *Time* provides a representative opinion of the relative merits of Graves's creative methodology:

With Hercules and his shipmates, Graves becomes an ancient Greek, moving among demigods and goddesses, myths and monsters with an easy familiarity and a wealth of erudite detail; both sometimes seem too much of a good thing. Atomic-age readers, ill-attuned to the leisurely, formal talk of Myth-Age Greeks, may find themselves skipping some of the longer speeches.⁷

Graves then took up a number of academic appointments in Britain and the United States; he was Clark Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge (1954), and notably following Cecil Day Lewis and W. H. Auden as Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford (1961–5). For most of his life he continued to write and work in Deyà, Majorca, and after escaping from the turbulent relationship with Laura Riding in 1939 he eventually married Beryl Pritchard in 1950. Throughout his career Graves had a series of influences on his thinking and his work; these would include T. E. Lawrence and W. H. R. Rivers, as well as a number of muses, including Nancy, Laura, and Beryl, among others.⁸ Robert von Ranke Graves died in 1985 at the age of 90.

Reading the biographies of Robert Graves, it becomes readily apparent that he was a man with a singular outlook. Stephen Spender wrote: 'All of his life Graves has been indifferent to fashion, and the great and deserved reputation he has is based on his individuality as a poet who is both intensely idiosyncratic and unlike any other contemporary poet and at the same time classical.'⁹

Many questions caught Graves's eye, and once a topic became the focus of intense interest he would try to get beneath its skin. He is someone who willingly and actively chose to plough his own furrow, but his idiosyncratic approach (even though Graves would probably

⁷ 'Books: The Golden Fleece', *Time* 15 Oct. 1945; see <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,792476,00.html#ixzz1NCGqdn2p>> (accessed 01/04/2011).

⁸ See Seymour (1995), 387–461. For RG's concept of the poet's relationship with and entitlement to a muse, especially later in his life, see Seymour (1995) 387–8. Seymour-Smith (1995), 93–4 and passim, Graves, R. P. (1995), 335–6, 368–9, 416–17.

⁹ Spender (1973); Stephen Spender also wrote: 'Of all poets of this time, Robert Graves is the one who, without solemnity but with total dedication, has kept the idea of poetry sacred and the idea of the poet true.'

not see it as such, and would not care if anyone thought that it was) has not always been welcome. Whatever the widespread popularity of his novels and poetry, academia has held a more diffident view of the scholastic value of Graves's output, and classicists especially seem to have baulked at his interpretation of myth and novelization of history. There has been cogent criticism of *The Greek Myths, I, Claudius*, and *Claudius the God*,¹⁰ and it is not the aim of the present collection of essays to promote Graves's work or suggest that his writing related (however loosely) to the discipline of Classics should be rehabilitated. Rather, the essays gathered here present individual readings of Graves's unique perspective on the various fields of study he involved himself with, and are intended to energize the debate about the value of his contribution. The essays should enhance and extend our understanding of his works within their original context, and point the way forward to assessing their relevance in how we (so to speak) figure out the ancient world. How did Graves see the classical world? Can Graves's interpretation of antiquity and his translations be seen in a new light that shows their enduring value, or should they be seen as limited by the assumptions and attitudes of his own time? Has his literary success, or even his notoriety, been detrimental to the discipline of Classics? His main publications related to Classics are detailed below, but Graves also produced poetry that used tropes and themes associated with the ancient world, and these are discussed further in Hurst's essay (Chapter 10).

Robert Graves wrote poetry for most of his adult life, producing seven distinct volumes of *Collected Poems*, and other poetry collections, over the working period from 1914 to 1975.¹¹ Unfortunately the present collection does not contain a comprehensive survey or analysis of the poetry, though aspects of it are examined in the essays by Hurst (Chapter 10), Burnside (Chapter 11), and Palaima (Chapter 12), and discussed incidentally elsewhere in the book. Graves's love poetry falls into five distinct chronological periods—his first marriage; meeting with Laura Riding, 1926–9; the years with Laura, 1930–9; the years before his marriage to Beryl, 1938–45; and the period at the

¹⁰ Beard (2006) compares Graves's laboured novels to Jack Pulman's celebrated TV adaptation; cf. Lowe (2005). One can also find criticism of Graves's poetry; for example, in the *Listener* Donald David (1959), 11–13, wrote that Graves made no allowance for the reader, or hardly even acknowledged their presence and this accounted for the toneless voice of his poetry.

¹¹ Ward (2003), 96.

end of *Collected Poems 1959*.¹² Numerous poems from different periods of his work feature gods and goddesses or mythic heroes. Examples include 'Prometheus', where the persona Graves adopts opines on 'the intractability of love'; 'Lyceia', his version of the story of Lycoan, the divine wolf and goddess of the Moon; 'Leda', where, like W. B. Yeats, Graves wrote of Zeus seducing Leda, the wife of King Tyndareus of Sparta; 'The Return of the Goddess Artemis'; and his love poem 'Ulysses', first published in 1933, where the amazing adventures, cunning, and tenacity of Homer's hero 'are rearranged and reinterpreted so that his story becomes a classic statement, a paradigm indeed, of man at the mercy of sexual appetite'.¹³ D. N. G. Carter's exposition of 'Ulysses' is illuminating and shows how much is yet to be mined from Graves's poetry in relation to the reception of Classics.

To the much-tossed Ulysses, never done
With woman whether gowned as wife or whore,
Penelope and Circe seemed as one:
She like a whore made his lewd fancies run,
And wifely she a hero to him bore.

In this first verse of 'Ulysses' Carter maintains that the rhythm of the sea that carried Ulysses on his journey is reflected in the rising and falling of the last two lines (and is evocative of Andrew Lang's 'surge and thunder of the Odyssey'), while the opening phrase suggests Ulysses is flotsam on the sea of love, 'a hero who is essentially passive, the victim rather than the vanquisher in his amatory exploits'.¹⁴ The poem is contextualized in Chapter 3 by Sheila Murnaghan.

While Graves's war experiences became widely read with the publication of *Good-bye to All That*, he had already published poetry written during the war and stands with Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfrid Owen, and Edmund Blunden as a First World War poet of some distinction. His war poetry is also pertinent to the focus of the recent collection, as demonstrated by 'A Dedication of Three Hats', with its reference to Mars, Minerva, and the muse Euphrosyne:¹⁵

¹² Carter (1989), 62.

¹³ Carter (1989), 82. The poem is reproduced in full in Murnaghan's essay.

¹⁴ Carter (1989), 83. ¹⁵ Graves (1988).

‘A Dedication of Three Hats’

This round hat I devote to Mars,
Tough steel with leather lined.
My skin’s my own, redeemed by scars
From further still more futile wars
The God may have in mind.

Minerva takes my square of black
Well-tasselled with the same;
Her dullest nurselings never lack
With hoods of scarlet at their back
And letters to their name.

But this third hat, this foolscap sheet,
(For there’s a strength in three)
Unblemished, conical and neat
I hang up here without deceit
To kind Euphrosyne.

Goddess, accept with smiles or tears
This gift of a gross fool
Who having sweated in death fears
With wounds and cramps for three long years
Limped back, and sat for school.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Sean O’Brien concluded that Graves’s love poetry should be ‘read alongside playful anthology pieces such as ‘The Persian Version’ and ‘Welsh Incident’. No one else offers his precise combination of eroticism, nightmare and epigram’.¹⁶

‘The Persian Version’, a poem about the Battle of Marathon first published in 1945 and discussed in the essay of Tom Palaima, warrants a brief excursion here because the reaction to Graves’s poem, true to form, touched a collective nerve with classicists. Despite a scarcity of written records other than the account of Herodotus, for over a century scholars have been divided into two camps engaged, as Hoyland notes, in a metaphoric push-and-shove in trying to reconstruct the battle.¹⁷ Tuplin argued from the Persian side and reckoned that Graves has here minimized its importance as part of an imperial invasion to subjugate Greece. The opposing view (see Hölkeskamp) promotes the notion that both Persia and the Greeks saw Marathon

¹⁶ O’Brien (2001).

¹⁷ Hoyland (2011), 265.

as purely a minor skirmish. In a short critique on Marathon, in his general history *Early Greece*, Oswyn Murray cites the first two lines of 'The Persian Version' and comments: 'From the Persian side there is something to be said for Robert Graves' analysis.'¹⁸ Graham Trengrove's close reading of the poem shows that the voice in the poem is neither that of the poet nor a historian giving their interpretation of events or even a commentary on the unreliability of the sources, but is that of an official spokesman putting a gloss on affairs. In a new century, seemingly built upon the shifting sands of public-relations spin and counterspin, this poem is as prescient as ever.¹⁹

Graves was a man well versed in the propaganda of war. He had seen Sassoon rail against the official government line promulgated to justify the allied strategy in France and Belgium; he had been shaped by the enormous loss of life at the Front; and his experience would lead him to question the official version, any version, and the white-wash splashed on by the victors. Considering the passage in *I, Claudius* where Claudius meets Pollio (see the discussion in Chapter 2, by Kennedy and O'Gorman), John Leonard writes, 'I have often thought in connection with this passage whether we have not been misreading Graves's famous satire "The Persian Version". Granted it is a devastating parody of official war-communiqués, but does it not also cast doubt on the "Greek theatrical tradition", and by implication on its historical tradition—a tradition that is the origin of all western historical-writing—as well?'²⁰

Another tradition, that of the historical novel, was well established when Graves wrote the *Claudius* novels—one only has to think of Tolstoy and Sir Walter Scott to determine the pedigree. Graves was not the first to adopt figures from the ancient world to the historical novel either; following in the wake of Lew Wallace's nineteenth-century novel *Ben-Hur*, Jakob Wassermann had written *Alexander in Babylon* (Fischer, Berlin 1905) and the basic model has been followed by a number of similar novels into the twenty-first century. Graves's historical novels were designed to make money, and so he had to ensure they were both populist and popular.²¹ The *Claudius* novels were so successful that Graves paid the mortgage off outright

¹⁸ Murray (1993), 281.

¹⁹ Trengrove (1986), 60–9.

²⁰ Leonard (2001), 259–72.

²¹ R. P. Graves (1990), 187–204; Seymour-Smith (1995), 241–50; Seymour (1997), 199–225.

on his home in Majorca; the film rights to the books were snapped up within a year by Alexander Korda; and these two books have never been out of print since they were first published. Graves had a serious interest in making money, and an as yet unanswered question is how was he so sure that a warts-and-all story of a Roman family, albeit a violent and flashy imperial soap opera, would turn into the gravy train it did? Graves outlined his approach:

Historical novels are not legitimate if they are an excuse for a thrilling story of modern passion in fancy dress. But they are legitimate if the writer starts with a sudden intimate feeling about a particular character, and believes that the story has been mistold by history. By then soaking himself in the period and reading contemporary accounts so as not to be biased, he is able to build up a story as a zoologist builds up a whole fossil animal from a couple of bones.²²

This concept can be mapped over Graves's historical novels, and the *Claudius* books in particular. The approach has its problems, however, such as the question of how the figures in a historical novel should speak: should they be made to speak in a modern, conversational tone, or should the author try for authenticity in the manner of their speech, or should there be a third way, a hybrid between the two approaches? The 'voice' of the historical novel is discussed in this volume in essays by Bennett, Kennedy and O'Gorman, and Murnaghan.

Mary Renault and Valerio Massimo Manfredi have each written trilogies about Alexander the Great that are rooted in the sources—just two examples in a burgeoning catalogue of historical fiction that draws on the ancient world of Greece and Rome. Many novelists in this genre do not appear to share Graves's notion of what constitutes historical fiction, but there are better parallels if one looks elsewhere. Hilary Mantel won the Man Booker Prize and the Walter Scott Prize for *Wolf Hall*, a historical novel that took a revisionist stance about the life of Thomas Cromwell, a character, like Claudius, whom history has not treated kindly, and placed him centre-stage in the political milieu around the throne of Henry VIII.²³ In a review for its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, James Woods identifies the qualities Mantel uses to tell her story (in *Wolf Hall*), including how the language of the novels is not that of the sixteenth century but an

²² RG quoted by Nicholson (1942), 283–6.

²³ Acocella (2009).

amalgam of styles that is a model of clarity for the twenty-first-century reader. Woods homes in on the reason for Mantel's success, something that could equally be applied to Graves's historical fiction:

In short, this novelist has the maddeningly unteachable gift of being interesting. Quite a few readers would be prepared to yawn at a novelistic scene set in 1530, featuring Thomas Cromwell, then one of Henry VIII's privy councillors, and Thomas Cranmer, the Anglican theologian who gained renown as the author of the Book of Common Prayer. Hasn't this material been worked over—in descending order of quality—by Ford Madox Ford, by Robert Bolt, and by the TV series 'The Tudors'? Yet such a scene in 'Wolf Hall' exhibits Mantel's stealthy dynamics. There is nothing dutifully 'historical' about this encounter. Instead, all is alive, silvery, alert, rapid with insight.²⁴

Controversy surrounding Graves's work has not been restricted to classicists—*Good-bye to All That* stirred up a hornets' nest of criticism because Graves's war experience was discussed with frankness and openness. Readers and critics were disapproving of his relaying of events, and his unvarnished descriptions of soldiers' behaviour under the stress of war seemed to provoke a backlash from all quarters. The manuscript had been seen by Edmund Blunden and was subsequently closely annotated by Siegfried Sassoon, and both men were deeply angry at Graves's self-centred version of the war; his use of 'poetic licence' and the presentation of certain fictionalized events as fact were additional grounds for criticism.²⁵ Sassoon in particular was incensed by the unsolicited inclusion of a poem he had sent to Graves in a letter (of 1918), and a section in the book recounting a visit to his mother in 1916 that he felt was an invasion of privacy and not for public consumption.²⁶ The criticism of Graves for producing such a 'stylized' and even 'manufactured' autobiography still resonates today.

It is worth noting that Graves was also unpopular with the critics for his own performance as a reader and broadcaster in public, discussed by Morris in this volume (Chapter 15). An exercise broadcast on BBC radio, had the actor Anthony Jacobs and Graves reading 'Counting the Beats' then 'The Terraced Valley', with mixed

²⁴ Wood (2012).

²⁵ Seymour-Smith (1995), 190–200; R. P. Graves (1990), 131–7; Seymour (1995), 175–86. See Duckworth (2004), 63–7, for a discussion of how two incidents in *Good-bye to All That* have been recycled by the novelist Pat Barker.

²⁶ R. P. Graves (1990), 132–7.

results. One review concluded that poets are not great at this, pointing to the ‘weird creaking chant of W. B. Yeats’, and considered Graves’s ‘flat and jerky’ delivery to be harder to listen to than Jacobs’s more polished performance—but ponders if this really showed how Graves ‘imagined the lines sounded as they formed in his mind’.²⁷ A reviewer in *Gramophone* writes of Graves reading a collection of his poems:

It is always interesting to hear a poet read his own works, even if someone else might in the event read them better. But the identity of the voice and the thing said is sometimes blurred when the reader is not the poet, especially in a work so personal as this. Mr. Graves uses a rather dead-pan delivery and he is not really very clear, though one gets used to him as time wears on . . .²⁸

Elizabeth Jennings compared Auden’s ‘splendid rendering of thirteen of his poems for *Argo* (RG194) which is a triumphant refutation of those who declare that poets are not the best speakers of their own verse’ to Graves’s jaded delivery:

His clipped dry donnish voice not only succeeds in ironing out most of the music it also manages to obscure much of the meaning. Only the most attentive Graves addict will be able to isolate these poems from the poet’s nearly disastrous handling of them, while the personality-hunter will find Mr Graves quite as elusive as he himself has here made the witty melancholy of his fine lyrics.²⁹

The *Observer* critic writes on the third recording Graves produced: ‘The reading is what we have come to expect from Graves—determinedly non-rhetorical, meticulous, a trifle hesitant, bringing out what is in the poem but almost overscrupulous in not adding anything extra.’³⁰

²⁷ RGA: uncredited review in the *Mitcham & Tooting Advertiser*; *Wallington & Carshalton Advertiser*, 14 June 1956. The programme, ‘A Poet’s Reading Compared with an Actor’s’, was introduced by James Reeves.

²⁸ RGA: uncredited review in *Gramophone* (Mar. 1960) refers to Listen LPV2.

²⁹ RGA: Elizabeth Jennings in the *Guardian* 9 June 1960 refers to Listen LPV2.

³⁰ RGA: John Wain in the *Observer*, 11 Sept. 1960 refers to *Argo* RG191. Derek Parker in the *Weekly Post*, 3 Dec. 1960 writes of RG191 that Graves ‘reads many short poems in a voice that is peculiarly and completely the voice of his poetry: a casual yet apposite voice, hammering away at our ridiculous pomposities, inching mistrust of our human claims to immutability. Never, somehow, on duty, Graves is nevertheless always a sentry at the gates—informally heading off deserters.’ Also cf. Jennings (1960).

In a quite different field, Graves again caused controversy when, in advance of writing the *Claudius* novels, he produced a heavily revised and condensed version of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and its publication as *The Real David Copperfield* (1933) caused indignation among Dickens scholars in Britain.³¹ Because Dickens had originally written *David Copperfield* for serialization, Graves surmised that a revision was necessary and proceeded to take out 'all the monthly-part padding and general hysteria . . . putting what's left into some sort of intelligible order'.³² A contemporary review in *Time* magazine expounded on how, due to the critical white noise, the publishers (Harcourt, Brace & Co.) prevaricated about an American edition. They decided to withdraw it from publication a week before the due date, and opted for producing an abridged version for schools instead.³³ The biographer Richard Perceval Graves provides another perspective, arguing that it was a misconceived project because Dickens was still enormously popular with the public, which may explain the poor sales in Britain. He goes on to add that after sixty years it can be viewed as a valuable exercise, because 'Graves's version is far more accessible to a modern audience than the original'.³⁴

The legitimacy of an adaptation, a translation, or a rearrangement of historical facts or motifs by an author is a compelling issue for discussion, and the essays collected here address this among other factors; the chapters by Andrew Bennett, Duncan Kennedy and Ellen O'Gorman, Sheila Murnaghan, Shaun Tougher, and Jon Coulston consider the historical novels; Philip Burton and Sonia Sabnis examine the translations; Sibylla Ihm has analysed myth and matriarchy, and Vanda Zajko discusses *The Greek Myths*; Tom Palaima, Mick Morris, Amanda Wrigley, A. G. G. Gibson, and Jonathan Perry discuss reception in the twentieth century; Isobel Hurst considers Graves's poetry in relation to the classical world; while John Burnside's essay gives a different perspective by providing the essential insight of one working poet into the work of another.

To attempt a synthesis of the similarities and outcomes of this project would have limited value, because readers from different

³¹ O'Prey (1982), 219. Seymour-Smith (1995), 223–4.

³² RG in R. P. Graves (1990), 161.

³³ See Book Review 'Dickens Brushed Up', *Time*, 26 Mar. 1934; the editor of the 1934 US edition was Merrill P. Paine, described by Seymour Smith (1995), 224, as 'a Dickensian pedagogue'. Notwithstanding, the edition was a sales success.

³⁴ R. P. Graves (1990), 161. Also see Seymour-Smith (1995), 223–5.

disciplines will (rightly) produce a diversity of conclusions. This is not to avoid nailing one's colours to any particular mast, but rather implies a desire for readers to fashion their own opinions about Graves's output and reflect on the current state of their discipline. Twenty years hence Classics will have been transformed again by contemporary culture and/or further academic research—whichever outcome transpires, the body of work represented here can be repositioned accordingly within that world.

However there is an unbridgeable gulf here between Graves's experience in the First World War and those of the reader a hundred years later. The war seems to have shaken the foundations of his very being, and the pointless nature of the killing seems to have led to Graves's questioning everything around him, while also affecting his relationships, sexual and otherwise. His contempt for authority is probably rooted here—why should he take any notice of what anyone thought who had not been through the same experiences as he had? Robert Graves was not an academic but a poet; one who wrote fiction to make money and followed his own star to produce stories, essays, and poems. These may be still popular, or may be unfashionable, or thought to be inaccurate, as though accuracy was the final arbiter of creativity. With a poet's input there will be no uniformity in the results. Reading John Dryden's or Cecil Day Lewis's translation of the *Aeneid*, one becomes aware that these poets draw upon the chaos and darkness of war—for Dryden, the English Civil War and the ensuing revolution that replaced James II; while Day Lewis was writing in the shadow of the Second World War (see Tom Palaima's essay for a discussion of war in poetry). For the translation of the classicist Stanley Lombardo the aftermath of the conflicts in Iraq would not be distant. Their respective translations, and there is no value judgment here, subtly expose the dissimilarities between the translators and illuminate Virgil from another aspect. The opening lines of the Cecil Day Lewis's *Aeneid* are a case in point:

I tell about the war who first from Troy's frontier,
Displaced by destiny, came to the Lavinian shores,
To Italy—a man much travailed by sea and land
By the powers above, because of the brooding anger of Juno,
Suffering much in war until he could found a city
And march his gods into Latium, whence rose the Latin race
The royal line of Alba, and the high walls of Rome.

Compare it with Lombardo's twenty-first century translation:

Arms I sing, and a man,
 The first to come from the shores
 Of Troy, exiled by Fate, to Italy
 And the Lavinian coast, a man battered
 On land and sea by the powers above
 In the face of Juno's relentless wrath;
 A man who also suffered greatly in war
 Until he could found his city and bring his gods
 Into Latium, from which arose
 The Latin people, our Alban forefathers,
 And the high walls of everlasting Rome.

In the light of considering other translators the essay of Philip Burton considers three questions regarding Graves's translations from Latin and Greek; firstly, Graves's championing of the plain prose style of translation; secondly, how Graves used his translation to position himself with regards to the original author and other translators; and finally, how far Graves's methodology reflected contemporary culture or just his idiosyncratic approach to the problem of translating the text in front of him. Emily Greenwood's investigation tackles the soundscape inherent in the 'translation' or, more accurately, the 'free adaptation' of the epic poem by the poet Christopher Logue.³⁵ Warren Anderson, reviewing Logue's 1962 translation of the *Patrokleia* from *Iliad* 16 writes in 1969:

What we have here is not translation, a carrying-over, but a tradition hardly less honorable which has fallen into desregard [*sic*] since the Renaissance: the practice of *aemulatio*, rivalry in the best sense. Logue is an emulator rather than a translator. Comparison with Lattimore would be entirely beside the point; we look instead (though warily) to Pound's Cantos and the Homage to Sextus Propertius. For Logue's purposes, the text of Homer must be both revered and challenged, given allegiance and also treated as a point of departure. His infidelity follows naturally from his fidelity and is justified by it. The poem he has given us, far from being a "rendering" of Patroclus' last hours, is a reexperiencing [*sic*] of their fevered, death-bound brilliance.³⁶

³⁵ For a discussion of the methodology used by translators of the *Iliad*, namely Fitzgerald, Fagles, and Lombardo, see Greenwood (2009), 503.

³⁶ Cf. Burton, Sabnis, Murnaghan, and Wrigley in this volume, and Anderson (1969), Folkart (1998), and Greenwood (2009) for an introduction to the intricacies and methodologies of translation.

Amanda Wrigley, in Chapter 16, points the reader to D. S. Carne-Ross the essayist and a translator of Pindar, who said of Graves's *The Anger of Achilles* (in its version for radio broadcast), 'the translations are, so far as possible, poets' translations rather than dons' translations'. Therein lies the dichotomy, between what the reader expects from the translator, and what the translator is trying (or is prepared) to give the audience. The characteristics of a reader, their analytical ability (or the desire to be, or not to be, analytical), and their need for education or entertainment (or both) is not a fixed generic point for an author/translator to aim at. One would expect that though the translator is a fixed point (poet or classicist), they face the impossible task of having to fit into a different set of clothes depending on who is going to pick up the book, or face the wrath of a subset of their potential readership. What should a translation be? Is the translator to be rigorous or entertaining (for which read 'populist'), or if they fall between two stools, risk ending up as neither?³⁷ Should a translator of the *Iliad* or *The Golden Ass*, for example, expect to achieve the aims of the eighteenth-century essayists Addison and Steele, who were determined to edify *and* entertain their readership? Do we, as readers, expect (or even want) to be 'enlightened'? Barbara Folkart writes that a translator (in Folkart's case, of the medieval poetry of Charles D'Orléans) immediately has to confront their own 'diachronic incompetence' and the fact of being cut off from the poem's 'cultural and pragmatic matrix';³⁸ however, there is not only an interaction between the text and reader 'but also the linguistic and cultural matrices in which both reader and text are embedded'.³⁹ The living, breathing language and life and smells of the street in medieval France or archaic Greece or the trenches of the Somme are not available to a reader in the twenty-first century. 'The cultural matrix' only remains in stones and monuments, while flesh and bone perish and ancient value-systems wither away. The result is that the translator immediately faces a deficit because they cannot experience the same milieu as that of the original audience of the poem. Folkart shows that for the modern reader the translator has to become a mediator between the past and present and to do so they should be a 'writer' and not merely a 'replicator'; and to be that 'writer' there is a need to invest as much material as necessary to make the poem the

³⁷ Folkart (1998), 11.

³⁸ Folkart (1998), 11.

³⁹ Folkart (1998), 20.

translator's own.⁴⁰ As a writer Graves could re-imagine the scenarios of ancient Greece and put his experience of the trenches into scenes of war and degradation but they could still be a plausible fabrication (see Sean Tougher and Jon Coulston's essays). Graves faced criticism for his handling of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; he gets into all sorts of trouble because he puts his stamp on a poem or narrative, and imbues it with what Zajko calls 'a literary quality'. Graves's (or another translator's) use of language may take the reader away from the source's literal or metaphorical meanings, and even distort or flatten the song of the Latin or Greek language, so much so that the original subtleties can be lost. However, a translator (or adaptor) creates an alternative version to that which has gone before, and one that brings to life the text in a way a contemporary audience can relate to. Folkart explains how Christopher Logue used a variety of methods to manipulate and create his acclaimed version of the *Iliad*:

A more recent and no less brilliant example [than Ezra Pound] is Christopher Logue's rewrite of the *Patrocleia* (Book 16 of the *Iliad*). Rather than going for the kind of Wedgwood-china imagery and diction run-of-the-mill translators fall into line with, Logue has worked in a resolutely contemporary idiom, with the sort of technique, diction and structures that would not be out of place in his own, direct poetry: there's absolutely no translating down, here . . . Logue has been even more audacious with the manipulation of cultural props, using all sorts of anachronisms and 'anatopisms' to get us inside the poem . . . And since it's impossible for the latter half of the twentieth century to subscribe to Homer's glorification of warfare, Logue has unhesitatingly reversed Homer's stance: his *Patrocleia* reads like a condemnation of war.⁴¹

Graves shows he is wedded to the idea of using the exact words, even creating them, to describe emotion and action. In an interview in 1969 he talked of love:

The act of love belongs to two people, in the way that secrets are shared. Hugs and kisses are permissible, but as soon as you start with what's called the mandalot—I invented the word, from the Greek; it comes from *mándalos* (which is the bolt you put in the socket) and means the tongue-kiss or by dictionary definition 'a lecherous and erotic kiss'—these familiarities you should reserve for those whom you really love.⁴²

⁴⁰ Folkart (1998), 21.

⁴¹ RG in *The Paris Review* (1969).

⁴² Carne Ross (1962/2010), 152.

The last word, for the moment at least, should go to Carne-Ross, as he argues that readers should not put Logue's translation next to Richmond Lattimore's. His comment in the postscript to Logue's *Patrocleia* may, to some extent, illuminate the translations of Robert Graves:

The point about good translation is not that it 'gives you the original'. It doesn't and can't and shouldn't try to. There is one place to get Homer's *Iliad* and only one place: in the fifteen thousand lines or so of the Greek text. What a translation does is to turn the original into something else (*vertit anglice*) . . .⁴³

Graves's *The Anger of Achilles*, a narrative translation of the *Iliad*, largely in prose, is an example of the above, but the opening lines in verse demonstrate both the flaws and power of his rendition. Compare this to the 1997 translation of Lombardo;⁴⁴ what should the reader take from either version of the epic tale? First Graves:

Sing, Mountain Goddess, sing through me
That anger which most ruinously
Inflamed Achilles, Peleus' son,
And which, before the tale was done,
Had glutted Hell with champions—bold,
Stern spirits by the thousandfold;
Ravens and dogs their corpses ate.
For thus did Zeus, who watched their fate,
See his resolve, first taken when
Proud Agamemnon, King of men,
An insult on Achilles cast,
Achieve accomplishment at last.⁴⁵

⁴³ See the introduction by Sheila Murnaghan to the Lombardo translation (1997), xvii–lviii.

⁴⁴ Graves continues: ' . . . I can tell you: it was Phoebus Apollo, the son of Almighty Zeus and Leto the Fair-Haired, who sent a fearful pestilence among the Greeks, by way of punishing Agamemnon their High King.' This has a poetic resonance with: 'Yet know, my master, God omnipotent | Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf | Armies of pestilence; and they shall strike | Your children yet unborn and unbegot, | That lift your vassal hands against my head | And threat the glory of my precious crown' (*Richard II*, III. iii).

⁴⁵ Just two recent examples are Tomas Alfredson's *Låt den rätte komma in* (2008) which became *Let Me In* (2010); and Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), which was remade as *The Ring* (2002); these Hollywood versions were very successful at the box office. A European success was Sergio Leone taking Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1960) and turning it into *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964).

Then Lombardo:

Rage:

Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage,
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls
of heroes into Hades' dark,
and left their bodies to rot as feasts
for dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done.

Begin with the clash between Agamemnon—
The Greek warlord—and godlike Achilles.

(*Iliad* 1.1–8)

The answer to the question must be subjective. Refashioning the original *Iliad* text, for example, 'into something else' through translation or adaptation is maybe what some scholars object to, because that 'something else' is not Homeric, or not Homeric enough—it is 'Homer-lite'. But if the latter reflects the contemporary milieu and speaks to a current readership, then is that necessarily a negative thing? Maybe a particular translation can suffer from the same critical dismay that proliferates when Hollywood takes a European or Asian low-fi hit and remodels it for the great mass of the cinema-going audience which resists films with subtitles.⁴⁶ In the music world, the same can happen when a 'cover version' of a track that has become something of a sacred cow is released; Eater's 1977 cover of *I'm Waiting for the Man*, rather than the original version by the Velvet Underground from 1967, will probably displease most Lou Reed aficionados.

CONCLUSION

In all of his endeavours it seems as though Graves tried to unwrap and expose the world he encountered, and then refashion it; this moulding was influenced by his beliefs about the Goddess or his experience of love, or war. He is insightful and infuriating in equal measure, and while we may not warm to his undoubtedly contrary

⁴⁶ Two recent examples are Tomas Alfredson's *Låt den rätte komma in* (2008) which became *Let Me In* (2010); and Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), which was remade as *The Ring* (2002); a European success was Sergio Leone taking Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1960) and turning it into *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964).

nature, as this collection of essays shows, his multifaceted work can still provoke a powerful contemporary response.

As an addendum to the ongoing discussion of Graves's literary output there is one cultural icon of the twentieth century who may (inadvertently) illuminate part of the debate. In the late 1950s Bob Dylan had access to a friend's library in New York, in which, while preferring poetry, he also read works by a range of authors from Thucydides to Balzac to Robert Graves. Dylan writes: 'I read *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, too. Invoking the poetic muse was something I didn't know about yet. Didn't know enough to start trouble with it, anyway.'⁴⁷ He would later meet Graves in London, and as Dylan says, 'I wanted to ask him some things about the book, but I couldn't remember much about it'.⁴⁸ So much for fame and influence—but it is noteworthy that Dylan read Graves when he was trying to find his own voice, listening to folk-songs, attracted by the ideas and the stories contained within them, and penetrating humanity in the milieu of fifties New York counterculture. Part of this searching led Dylan to an awakening:

[Roy] Orbison, though, transcended all the genres—folk, country, rock and roll or just about anything. His stuff mixed all the styles and some that hadn't even been invented yet. He could sound mean and nasty on one line and then sing in a falsetto voice like Frankie Valli in the next. With Roy, you didn't know if you were listening to a *marachi* or opera. He kept you on your toes. With him, it was all about fat and blood. He sounded like he was singing from an Olympian mountaintop and he meant business.⁴⁹

Dylan's analysis of Roy Orbison gives an insight into the creative process of a great musician and artist, and one that provides a functional allegory for the methodology Graves used in fashioning his work, especially that related to Classics. Orbison had a unique voice and writing style and he attracted many fans from the 1960s onwards—and importantly for Orbison, his peers recognized his talents. Although Graves and Orbison were men of different generations there are similarities in their characters and their writing—both men would mould the rules of their craft to suit themselves. Graves used an 'analeptic' creative technique, an imaginative leap, where he tried to re-create a past and put himself in the mind of his

⁴⁷ Dylan (2004), 45.

⁴⁸ Dylan (2004), 45.

⁴⁹ Dylan (2004), 33.

protagonist.⁵⁰ He would mix fact and fiction, or interchange words, and play with sounds and meaning to get the best literary combination to match his intention.⁵¹ This is not to judge the artistic success or failure of such a process, nor advocate that one should similarly equate artistic prowess across disciplines or genres. The talents of a musician and a writer can be disparate, but correspondence in the innovations and adaptations in technique mixed with ability (in whatever subjective form that may take) may go some way to explain the popularity and durability of their creative labours. Being controversial (whatever that expression may mean and however it manifests itself) can invoke a negativity amongst commentators which can in turn adversely affect the reception of a work in the wider world, although one could argue that *I, Claudius* would be an exception. But should one always equate 'controversial' with the negative? *Good-bye to All That* has provoked much argument and debate. Yet after eight decades the book still exists, it is still in print, and will probably ignite further discussion for years to come. Can this be a bad thing? If so, then on what terms is it a bad thing? Similarly, Graves's interpretation of classical myth has had a bumpy ride, but should his approach be accepted as some part of the critical and scholarly landscape or should it be consigned to the scrapheap? There will be many who will lean towards the latter view, but I would prefer that Robert Graves's works should remain to be rediscovered and debated by future generations of readers and scholars. The closing sentence of Peter Green's critical essay on the diversity and longevity of Graves's poetry stands well with this collection of essays and could equally apply to much of Graves's other literary work:

Above all, he has inspired generations, win or lose, with the idea of what a poetic vocation should be. Those 'green fields of unrest' that lie at the heart of his last poem form an apt coda to his career. He would, I think, be proud to echo the claim of that other, equally tough, equally woman-oriented poet, the seventh-century B.C. Greek colonist Archilochus, who declared: 'I am both the War-God's servant, and have understanding of the Muses' lovely gifts.' In his rugged, smoldering, island bound old age he stands as a symbol for something above and beyond plain tangible achievement.⁵²

⁵⁰ Goldman (2003) cites Robert Graves in *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' (p. 45). Also cf. Presley (1997), 301.

⁵¹ Green (1961/2), 46–50.

⁵² Green (1983), 118–19.

‘It’s readable all right, but it’s not history’

*Robert Graves’s Claudius Novels and the
Impossibility of Historical Fiction*

Andrew Bennett

Two contemporary academic reviews of Robert Graves’s *Claudius* novels—a review of *I, Claudius* in the *Classical Journal* by the American classicist Dorothea Clinton Woodworth, and a review of *Claudius the God in Scrutiny* by the British literary critic D. W. Harding—may be said to encapsulate the impossibility of historical fiction. The two reviews, both published in 1935, provide what might seem to be disciplinarily stereotypical and almost diametrically opposed views of the Claudius project, coming at it as they do from a historical and from a literary perspective respectively. It is on this opposition of literature to history, an opposition already at work within the generic mongrel-form of the historical novel, that I want to focus in this essay in order to think about the reception of Graves’s Roman novels.

In her review of the novel, Woodworth characterizes *I, Claudius* as ‘an interpretation in today’s language of a period nineteen centuries remote’, and comments that: ‘Any student of ancient or contemporary society may profitably read the author’s keen juxtaposition of the one against the other.’¹ But the review is focused above all on the question of historical accuracy. For Woodworth, the novel is ‘More real than ponderous, documented Roman history’ but still historical, and historically veracious, since, she declares, Graves ‘uses ancient

¹ Woodworth (1935), 366.

sources as a scholar should'.² Woodworth therefore devotes much of her review to detailing points where Graves has silently chosen between 'divergent accounts' of events, or where he has invented events or circumstances of which there is no way of 'filling in gaps' in the historical record.³ Such 'reconstructions', she considers, are 'skilfully and sympathetically contrived'. 'If this is fiction,' she continues—in a slightly odd equivocation that leaves open the possibility that for Woodworth it isn't, or shouldn't be—'not only is it consonant with historical accounts, but it also reconciles apparent discrepancies in the tradition and builds up the story by supplying motivation.'⁴ In other words, Woodworth reads the novel, in the first place, as a piece of historical writing. Indeed, she declares that commenting on the 'literary quality of the book' is 'scarcely within the scope' of her review, and her attempt briefly to do so suggests the limits of her sense of the 'literary'. For Woodworth, the novel's literariness is limited to 'felicitous translations from Homer' and others, and the 'unification' of the narrative, or the various narrative strands (by the device of the Sibylline prophecy in chapter 1 and by what she calls the 'self-consistency' of the characterization of Claudius through which Graves is able to 'reconcile' the 'discordant phases' of the emperor's life).⁵ In other words, when Woodworth talks about the 'literary' qualities of the novel, the features she refers to are more-or-less indistinguishable from the qualities that one might expect in a well written and historically reliable work. The important point for Woodworth is the novel's admirable, because accurate, historicity.

By direct and illuminating contrast, on the other hand, D. W. Harding, the author of, amongst other things, a volume of essays on Jane Austen entitled *Regulated Hatred*, doesn't much like *Claudius the God*, and marshals his considerable powers of *Scrutiny*-honed disdain to express his regulated hatred of the novel. 'Mr Graves has well succeeded in what seems to have been his object', Harding begins mildly enough, 'to give by careful reconstruction a convincing idea of the memoirs of an imperial Roman statesman written according to the perspective of the period'.⁶ But the next sentence craftily damns with faint praise: 'He has been very thorough', Harding assures the reader. And then comes the sucker-punch: 'Details of

² Woodworth (1935), 366–7.

³ Woodworth (1935), 367.

⁴ Woodworth (1935), 368.

⁵ Woodworth (1935), 368.

⁶ H[arding] (1935), 421.

public works and policies, of ceremonies and campaigns, are all made palatable, and it is easy to go on reading right to the end unless you can think of something you want to do'.⁷ As if that final phrase needs emphasis (not 'something better to do', but just 'something'—*anything*—'you want to do'), the next sentence rubs it in: 'For those who prefer reading to gardening at the week-end this book will be thoroughly welcome.'⁸ This is the epitome of the kind of laconic, often barely stated but always imperious disdain, the regulated hatred, indeed, for which *Scrutiny* and its chief editor F. R. Leavis were famous—the insinuation being that, for many, gardening might in fact be preferable to reading Graves's novel. Harding also assesses the book's literary qualities, in a brief comment that explains what Graves does well but fails to do enough of:

The most interesting part of the book, the only part with any pressure behind it, is the end, in its presentation of Claudius's tired cynicism towards the kind of affairs his active years had been devoted to, and his realization that his efforts could have contributed nothing to the ideal he had held for Rome. It is only here for a few pages that the story has any of the interest that one might have hoped for on the strength of some of Mr. Graves' poetry.⁹

Harding concludes, more generally, that the book is 'academic' and that it displays all the 'virtues and lifelessness' of academic writing. I think that we might interpret the 'pressure' that Harding responds to at the end of *Claudius the God* as having something to do with the 'literary' as opposed to the scholarly or historical, and as being related no doubt to what Samuel Johnson calls 'the force of poetry'.¹⁰ Harding associates this 'pressure' with 'some of' Graves's poetry, and it seems to involve the kind of tension—within Claudius's consciousness and between his sense of idealism and his sense of the futility of his efforts to restore the Republic—that we might see as 'dramatic' or 'novelistic' or 'literary': it is this kind of tension or conundrum or aporia or paradox that, for a certain kind of critic at least, *constitutes* the literary itself. But Harding's conclusion is that for the critic who

⁷ H[arding] (1935), 421.

⁸ H[arding] (1935), 421–2.

⁹ H[arding] (1935), 422.

¹⁰ Johnson (2000) 247: the essay is from *The Rambler*, vol. 168 (Saturday, 26 Oct. 1751). For Johnson, this is a force 'which calls new powers into being, which embodies sentiment, and animates matter'.

prefers gardening, even, to the reading of dry, academic history, there is just too little of this kind of 'pressure'.

Much of what I want to discuss is encapsulated in these opposing responses to the two novels, this opposition of the response of the classicist to that of the literary critic, indeed of history to literature—an opposition that is in fact already at work in the generic identity of the *Claudius* novels and even in some ways coded within the distinction between the 'readable' and the historical in my title's quotation from *I, Claudius*. I think we can take it that, insofar as Robert Graves may be said to have made a significant contribution to twentieth-century fiction—to fiction as opposed to autobiography, war writing, poetry, translation, the popularizing through rewriting of classical mythology, or elaborations on his own idiosyncratic (if not just plain inaccurate) brand of mythopoetics—it is through the Roman novels, and particularly the two *Claudius* novels. It is these two novels that have reached a wide audience, and not only through film and television adaptations: the novels were immediately popular and have been in print more-or-less continuously since their publication in 1934. One straightforward way to gauge the specifically *literary* impact of Graves's *Claudius* novels, however, is to note their place within—or indeed their absence from—literary-critical discourse. Since their publication there have been only a handful of academic articles on the novels, the most significant of which are a 1995 essay by Philip Burton on their cultural and political topicality or contemporaneity; a rather shorter piece by Chris Hopkins from 1999 on Graves's work in the context of other historical novels of the period; an essay published the following year by Clayton Koelb on the engagement with the past in the *Claudius* novels as well as three further essays in a collection edited by Ian Firla; and, most recently, a technical piece from the field of translation studies from 2005 on the novels in relation to the question of 'pseudotranslation', by Olaf du Pont.¹¹ There is also a 2004 essay by the critic P. N. Furbank on the weakness of the historical novel in general that treats the *Claudius* novels as exemplary.¹² This seems to me to represent relatively thin pickings, and part of my interest in discussing the novels is to try to tease out some sense of why, despite their continuing popularity over three-quarters of a century, Graves's *Claudius* novels have not been much

¹¹ Burton (1995); Hopkins (1999); Koelb (2000); Firla (2000); du Pont (2005).

¹² Furbank (2004).

recognized or studied or appreciated or indeed read within the literary-critical institution—why, despite Martin Seymour-Smith's assessment that the *Claudius* novels are 'anything but academic or "historical" in the accepted sense' and his assertion that *I, Claudius* was 'hailed as a masterpiece by reviewers', D. W. Harding's judgement of the literary failings of *Claudius the God* in fact seems accurately to have foreshadowed the subsequent reception of both novels by mainstream literary critics.¹³ My suggestion is that this situation has something to do with certain intrinsic difficulties in the historical novel as such, difficulties that Graves fails to resolve and perhaps indeed exacerbates: the *Claudius* novels may be said to bring to our attention the problem of the historical novel itself, its 'impossibility' even.

There is confusion, from the first, regarding this strange tautology, or oxymoron, 'historical fiction'—regarding the relationship between history and the novel or history and fiction. The phrase 'historical novel' is a tautology in the sense that all novels, by their very nature, even those set in the future, are 'historical' because they relate events that have been (or will have been). While it is true that science fiction is often based on an imagined future (Graves's own 1949 novel *Seven Days in New Crete* itself being an example), few if any novels have been narrated in the future tense. And even if they are or could be, even such a futuring in fact acts *as if* it tells of a certain past. But 'historical novel' is also an oxymoron with respect to the fact that that which is historical is precisely not, precisely opposed to, that which is 'novel'—in the sense of 'new', to be sure, but also in the sense that insofar as the novel is identified with 'fiction', it is concerned with what is imagined as opposed simply to recording what happened.¹⁴

¹³ Seymour-Smith (1982), 229, 232; see also Seymour (1995), 222, on the 'eulogistic' reviews of *I, Claudius*, which, with *Claudius the God*, led to the award of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Hawthornden Prize. It is perhaps significant that Jerome de Groot's recent book on *The Historical Novel* makes only a single passing reference to Robert Graves (de Groot (2010), 4).

¹⁴ See Wallace (2005), x. On the rather specialized question of a future-tense narrative, see Abbott (2005), 534–5. Abbott cites Michael Frayn's 1967 novel *A Very Private Life* as, unusually, a novel set in the future, but points out that it is in fact told mainly in the present tense. As Abbott comments, 'even future tense narrative conveys a sense of something already there to be recounted, if only in a place called the future'. For a rather different take on the 'impossibility' of the historical novel, see Furbank (2004), 95: Furbank argues that there are two types of historical novel, the 'modernizing' and the 'archaizing', and that 'both suffer from attempting

It may be that the confusion about historical fiction is generated, paradoxically, by the attempt properly to demarcate the two discourses, to assert their fundamental difference. At the end of his 2006 introduction to the Penguin edition of *I, Claudius*, Barry Unsworth catches himself up on this point. The questions of historical accuracy and of the relationship between historicity and interpretation 'persist', he comments. 'We don't know,' he concludes: we don't know about the past, and we don't know about Claudius's true character and his motivations, 'nobody does':

But of course it doesn't matter. Yet again we have to remind ourselves of what we are always in danger of forgetting as we read this compelling narrative, with its impeccable research, the tremendous intellectual feat of organization that it represents. It is fiction, after all.¹⁵

What Unsworth engages with here is the difficulty of reading Graves's novels, and the particular uncertainty, anxiety even, that they present with regard to their own historicity. For Unsworth, this involves an inevitable, unavoidable problem of forgetting that these are not historical accounts, and the need to remember, again and again, that *I, Claudius* 'is fiction, after all'. The problem for Graves, the problem that he faces but fails fully to confront or resolve, is that the historical novel both is and is not historical. It is this ultimately deconstructive logic that, I suggest, cannot be accepted within the terms set by Graves's novels. However much the distinction might be blurred or complicated, Graves cannot rest content within the terms of the unstable, undecidable both-and logic—the logic that may in fact be said to be at work in the literary more generally. This forgetting to which Unsworth alludes is, in the end, the problem: these novels both are and are not historiography, but it often seems that Graves himself would like us to forget that inconvenient truth, to forget that he is *not* writing history.

Graves's own conflicted sense of the significance of history to his novels might be discerned in two remarks in letters to T. E. Lawrence from 1933: he comments that *I, Claudius* is 'largely guess-work &

something impossible'—both, briefly, involve insoluble logical and chronological improbabilities. In fact, Furbank concludes that 'the historical novel cannot be historical', since it 'simply does not work as an art form unless some place is found in it, by fictional means, for the modern consciousness' (Furbank (2004), 112).

¹⁵ Unsworth (2006), x. References to *I, Claudius* are to this edition, Graves (2006b), and cited as *IC* in the text.

imagination'; but he also tells Lawrence that he chose Claudius for his subject and as his narrator because 'he was a historian before he was anything else'.¹⁶ Graves also complains of *I, Claudius* to Julie Matthews in a letter of July 1933, that 'I have to read so many classical authorities to get it anything like historical that it's been a beastly job'.¹⁷ In a letter of May 1934 to Tom Matthews, Graves includes a list of 'historical notes' in case Matthews reviews the novel.¹⁸ The notes include explanations of Graves's additions ('suggestions') to the historical record where there are gaps and an explanation of his method. He has, he says, nowhere '*gone against* history' but has 'felt free to invent' where there are uncertainties or gaps: 'If I had written my version of the story in the second century it would now be taken as authentic', he remarks rather boldly.¹⁹ But again there is a certain ambivalence: while Graves asserts that he is 'not a Classical scholar or anything of that sort', and that if he had been 'my historical conscience would not have let me invent anything', he also warns that reviewers will have to be careful not to claim invention where there are in fact historical sources. The screenplay that he is preparing for Alexander Korda's proposed film of the Claudius novels, he remarks in a later letter, 'will be kept as historical as possible' (O'Prey (1982), 242).

Graves repeatedly seeks to assert the full, proper historicity of his writing, then, not in order to question or to shake up the opposition of novel and history, but simply in order to assert the authenticity of his narrative, and ultimately to confirm the soundness of his own scholarship.²⁰ The problem is exacerbated in often strangely insouciant ways in relation to the various kinds of text with which the novels are surrounded (the subcategory of paratext that Gérard Genette calls 'peritexts')²¹—most of which seem intended to assert that this is indeed history, and not fiction or literature. So, before they begin, the novels present various peritexts that challenge the reader's sense of the novelistic. In the first place, the title-pages of the two novels

¹⁶ Quoted in Seymour-Smith (1982), 255–6.

¹⁷ O'Prey (1982), 224.

¹⁸ See O'Prey (1982), 236–7 and appendix B (pp. 348–9).

¹⁹ O'Prey (1982), 349.

²⁰ As a number of critics have pointed out, Graves may have been influenced in this respect by his great-great uncle, the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke, often seen as the 'founder' of modern, empirically based historical study (see Hopkins (1999), 131–2; Burton (1995), 209).

²¹ Genette (1997), 5.

present elaborations on the short titles, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, which seem to be intended to announce, above all, the historicity of the ensuing texts:

I, Claudius
from the autobiography of
Tiberius Claudius
Emperor of the Romans
born 10 BC
murdered and deified
AD 54

‘From’ is both ambiguous here and boldly assertive of autobiographical and therefore historical authenticity. And then there is the longer and even seemingly almost self-parodic title-page for *Claudius the God*:

Claudius the God
and his wife Messalina
The troublesome reign of Tiberius Claudius
Caesar, Emperor of the Romans
(born 10 BC, died AD 54),
as described by himself;
also his murder at the hands of the
notorious Agrippina
(mother of the Emperor Nero)
and his subsequent deification
as described by
others²²

Everything that is presented in these full titles beyond the short title (the dates, the details of events, the specification of family relations, and that odd and historically anxious phrase ‘as described by others’) goes to counterbalance or even to eliminate or eradicate the novelistic—including the novelism of the phrases ‘I, Claudius’ and ‘Claudius the God’. In early editions of *I, Claudius* the title-page even included what purports to be a facsimile of the Greek signature of the emperor Claudius, as if as an autobiographical guarantee of authenticity. Next, since the 1941 Penguin edition of the novel, the reader of *I, Claudius* is confronted by a poem, ‘the Latin version

²² Graves (2006c), title-page. References to *Claudius the God* are to this edition and are cited as CG in the text.