

THE ART OF POETRY NO. 11

ROBERT GRAVES

Dressed in corduroys, mariner's sweater, black horsehide jacket, and with a blanket wrapped around his middle, Robert Graves rolled his own cigarettes and chain-smoked throughout the interview. Reading glasses hung from his neck on a ribbon, which frequently became tangled in his hair. Tall, loosely built, Graves has always been physically powerful, but owing to a climbing accident during his school years he cannot swivel his head and so uses a reading stand, fidgeting it into strategic positions on the desk in front of him while he talks. Tins of small Dutch cigars, jars of tobacco, marbles, pencils, and porcelain clown heads are on the desk. There is a carton brimming with press clippings on the floor. Over the fireplace is a shelf with the works of T.E. Lawrence; on the mantel, Greek, Roman, Oriental, and African figurines. "This dial of wood? From a tree hewn in Shakespeare's yard." He fingered it, spoke of continuity. He knew Hardy, and Hardy knew—

Gertrude Stein first told Robert Graves about Majorca. He and Laura Riding moved there in 1929; they built the stone house in Deyá he now occupies and lived there together until 1936, when the Spanish Civil War broke out. He returned ten years later and has lived there ever since. There is an orchard with fifteen kinds of

fruit trees, a large vegetable garden, and an English-style lawn of Bermuda grass.

Robert Graves is the author of over one hundred books, besides a number of anonymous rewrite jobs for friends. His most important prose work is *The White Goddess*, a history of poetic myth—"the language of poetic myth . . . was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honor of the Moon goddess, or Muse . . . [and] this remains the language of true poetry—'true' in the nostalgic modern sense of the 'unimprovable original, not a synthetic substitute'". The true poet worships the White Goddess, or goddess of creation; unswerving and absolute devotion to her is the poet's only path. He "falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse." The present Muse is fifty-two years younger than Graves—"but we are the same age" . . . "I am at the top of my manic cycle because good things are happening to her just now." She is a classical dancer performing in a far-off city.

At various times during the following interview, he was setting the table, correcting a manuscript, checking references, cutting his nails with an enormous pair of scissors, picking carrots, singing folk songs, and slicing beans. He was not an easy man to keep up with.

—*Peter Buckman & William Fifield, 1969*

ROBERT GRAVES

Do you notice anything strange about this room?

INTERVIEWER

No.

GRAVES

Well, everything is made by hand—with one exception: this nasty plastic triple file which was given me as a present. I've put it

here out of politeness for two or three weeks, then it will disappear. Almost everything else is made by hand. Oh yes, the books have been printed, but many have been printed by hand—in fact some I printed myself. Apart from the electric light fixtures, everything else is handmade; nowadays very few people live in houses where anything at all is made by hand.

INTERVIEWER

Does this bear directly on your creative work?

GRAVES

Yes: one secret of being able to think is to have as little as possible around you that is not made by hand.

INTERVIEWER

In *The White Goddess*, you identified the Muse-poet with the Sacred King, who was sacrificed to the Moon-goddess as a divine victim, and expressed your belief that the true poet must also, in a sense, die for her. In spite of all you've survived, do you still hold to this?

GRAVES

Yes. What nearly always happens is that the Muse finds it impossible to sustain the love of a poet and allies herself with a pretended poet who she knows is not a real one. Someone she can mother. I have given a picture of it in a poem called "Lack." The process starts again each time that there's a death of love, which is as painful as a real death. There's always a murderer about, always a "Lack" character. The King or poet represents growth, and the rival or tanist represents drought.

INTERVIEWER

Surely long years of service to the Muse are rewarded.

GRAVES

The reward is becoming eventually attached to somebody who's not a murderess. I don't want to talk about it because I don't want to tempt my luck.

INTERVIEWER

By definition, your pursuit of the Muse cannot bring satisfaction. What has it given you?

GRAVES

It has brought me nearer and nearer to the center of the fire, so to speak.

INTERVIEWER

Your poems, especially your love poems, get more intense as you go on. Is that a function of age or experience?

GRAVES

One gets to the heart of the matter by a series of experiences in the same pattern, but in different colors.

INTERVIEWER

In other words, you don't learn anything new, but you get a deeper understanding.

GRAVES

That's about it. An understanding of what the poet's ordeals are. Love poems must be bounced back off a moon. Moons vary. Love a different Muse-woman and you get a different poem.

INTERVIEWER

What about that simple appetite, lust, which you have attacked?

GRAVES

Lust involves a loss of virtue, in the sense of psychic power.

Lust is giving away something that belongs to somebody else. I mean the act of love is a metaphor of spiritual togetherness, and if you perform the act of love with someone who means little to you, you're giving away something that belongs to the person you do love or might 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. I'm on simple hugs-and-kisses terms with several friends. That's all right. But promiscuity seems forbidden to poets, though I do not grudge it to any nonpoet.

INTERVIEWER

Can the experience of the Muse give felicity?

GRAVES

Not really. But what does? Felicity and pain always alternate. She serves as a focus and challenge. She gives happiness. Here I use the English language precisely—hap: happening. She gives hap; provides happening. Tranquility is of no poetic use. (The first to use Muse in the sense of White Goddess was Ben Jonson—then it dropped down into weakly meaning self-inspiration of young men.)

After experience of the untranquil Muse one may move on to the Black Goddess—for black is positive in the East and stands for wisdom. Can a white Muse become a black one, or must it be another Muse? That is difficult . . .

INTERVIEWER

They are all about of an age—

GRAVES

As a rule the Muse is one whose father has deserted her mother

when she was young and for whom therefore the patriarchal charm is broken, and who hates patriarchy. She may grow to be very intelligent, but emotionally she is arrested at about the age of fourteen or fifteen.

INTERVIEWER

What is the Muse's reaction to the poet?

GRAVES

It's embarrassing in a way for a well-known poet to write poems to a girl. She may resent being made a part of literary history. In France it is different. Many a woman wants to be known as the last girl Victor Hugo slept with . . . I'm all against literary history. Sometimes that's the reason why a "great poem," one that occurs in all the anthologies, is bad. It is usually interesting to examine its history.

INTERVIEWER

You mean it's been manufactured for an event?

GRAVES

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

The White Goddess is a handbook and a shelter behind which all questions can be answered. Do you feel the need for a final definition of what you're up to?

GRAVES

The White Goddess and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* are curious: I wrote the first to define the non-Jewish element in Christianity, especially the Celtic. And I wrote the second, with the help of the late Joshua Podro, to drive the Greek and Roman element out of what was a purely Jewish event. The curious result was that a special Early Christian Society got founded at

Cambridge, based on the *Nazarene Gospel*, and various White Goddess religions started in New York State and California. I'm today's hero of the love-and-flowers cult out in the Screw State, so they tell me: where hippies stop policemen in the street and say, "I adore you, officer." Also I get a number of letters from witches' covens, requesting flying ointment, magical recipes, and esoteric information.

INTERVIEWER

In the "Colophon to Love Respekt" you talk of the battlefield being deserted. Who won?

GRAVES

I meant that there was no occasion for further poems on the subject . . . The historical sequence of a man's poems has a general resemblance to the order in which they are written. Yet often one writes a poem a long time before, or long after, a thing happens. Autobiography doesn't correspond exactly with poetic sequence.

INTERVIEWER

You get the idea for a poem and then life catches up with it?

GRAVES

Or alternatively, you have omitted recording a poetic experience sometime, and it occurs later. The words are already fixed in the storehouse of the memory. The poem is there at the origin, but at the seventh level of consciousness, and rises up gradually through each repeated revision. The rereading touches off the original hypnotic state, but expression is amplified.

INTERVIEWER

In what way amplified?

GRAVES

For example, by the dreams of the night, which are the real

interpretations in the primitive mind of the events of the previous day. A poem is nonetheless present from the conception, from the first germ of it crossing the mind—it must be scratched for and exhumed. There is an element of timelessness. The leading atomic scientist in Australia agreed with me the other day that time does not really exist. The finished poem is present before it is written and one corrects it. It is the final poem that dictates what is right, what is wrong.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you not write war poems—of your trench experience in World War I like your friend Sassoon, and like Owen?

GRAVES

I did. But I destroyed them. They were journalistic. Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were homosexuals; though Sassoon tried to think he wasn't. To them, seeing *men* killed was as horrible as if you or I had to see fields of corpses of women.

INTERVIEWER

Your poems are very complete and personal statements. Are you not at all reticent about what you reveal?

GRAVES

You tell things to your friends that you don't put into print.

INTERVIEWER

But your audience . . .

GRAVES

Never use the word "audience." The very idea of a public, unless a poet is writing for money, seems wrong to me. Poets don't have an "audience": They're talking to a single person all the time. What's wrong with someone like Yevtushenko is that he's talking to thousands of people at once. All the so-called great artists were

but that is a long argument.

[Redacted text]

One strange feature of the Indian school is their ^{wholesale adoption} ~~of~~ Max Müller's Aryan creed. They seem unaware that ^{the British take} ~~they~~ were first civilized from Africa, not from Central Asia, and by a ^{whose natural mathematical genius has it is said} ~~the~~ people ^{never since been excelled} ~~by~~.

Professor Dorson's copious index of sources omits our wisest and most ^{knowledgeable living} folklorist, George Swart Evans, whose ~~work~~ ^{The Horse and The Furrow} and ^{Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay}, are now followed by ^{its} even more remarkable ^{The Pattern Under the Plough}, a single page of which is worth a wilderness of folklorists.

[Redacted text]

^{especially his} extraordinary ^{accounts} of ~~the~~ smiths and horses.

Smiths were so closely connected with magic from the earliest times that they ^{refused} ~~were~~ a Catholic patron saint longer than any other craft, and ^{are now taken} ~~were~~ Saint Eloi too seriously. ^{This St. Eligius} ~~The~~ Bishop of Noyon had been a mere goldsmith, not a blacksmith, and ^{being} therefore wholly unversed in horse-lore, ^{we} ~~was~~ privileged to mount a horseshoe on his wall. ^{it points downwards,} ~~it~~ ^{still admits} ~~the~~

as any member of the Wandering Company of Farriers may do.

farrier was the only craftsman admitted to the secrets of the ^{the Horseman's Ward} ~~Society of~~ ^{which} ~~was~~, which seems, like early Scottish Freemasonry, to have been ^{formed} ~~formed~~ by ^{returning} ~~the~~ Crusaders. ^{So many of the} ~~Some~~ details of East Anglian horse magic, plough magic, seed magic, smithcraft and iron-work ^{as are given here have never been recorded,} ~~are~~ ^{been printed before in such small} ~~space.~~ ^{the most} ~~of~~

trying to talk to too many people. In a way, they were talking to nobody.

INTERVIEWER

Hence your estimate of the English poets, whom you've criticized pretty heavily from the Poetry Chair at Oxford?

GRAVES

There are fifteen English poets—I am speaking precisely—in the history of listed literature who were real poets and not playing at it.

INTERVIEWER

Would you care to name them?

GRAVES

That wouldn't be polite.

INTERVIEWER

What do they have in common?

GRAVES

A source in the primitive. In the prerational.

INTERVIEWER

As you work at a poem, do you feel that you are in some sense matching?

GRAVES

What happens is this—if a hypnotist says, "Look at this ring," and you are hypnotized by looking at the ring, then if he produces that ring again any time afterward, you go down. So also if you're writing a poem, and you come back to it the next day, you're immediately rehypnotized and at it again at that level.

INTERVIEWER

Is it the physical circumstance? This room?

GRAVES

No, it's not the ambience. The ambience may help. It's the actual draft, which is yourself. That's the hypnotic ring.

INTERVIEWER

And what happens if you don't "go down"?

GRAVES

That happened to me only yesterday. You can't force it intellectually. You spoil the poem. You mess it up. When you've worked through to the real poetic level, the connections webbing together every single word are quite beyond intellectual arrangement. A computer couldn't do it. You've got not merely sound and sense to deal with but the histories of the words, cross-rhythms, the interrelation of all the meanings of the words—a complete microcosm. You never get it quite right, but if you get it almost right, it insulates itself in time. That's why real poems travel.

INTERVIEWER

One feels your poetry has become more and more urgent, especially in the love lyrics which begin late.

GRAVES

Don't forget that I began in the Victorian era; I had a lot to throw off. My poetic system accords with the Irish of the eighth century A.D., which was untinged by Rome and which passed over eventually into Wales. Where did it come from? From the East. The correspondence with Sufic poetry is immense. That accounts for my interest in Omar Khayyám—a very noble poet so mishandled by FitzGerald. Besides, one gradually ceases to take critics into account.

INTERVIEWER

Who got you to come to the Balearic Islands?

GRAVES

Gertrude Stein.

INTERVIEWER

What did you think of her?

GRAVES

She had an *eye*. She used to say she had been the only woman in Picasso's life, that she had formed him. Maybe this was true; the other females were only round and about.

INTERVIEWER

The poem you've shown me just now, "The Thing to Be Said," seems to sum up so much.

GRAVES

Even in "The Thing to Be Said," which I am working on now, which is about the necessity of first statement and that treats obsessive revision as a disease of age, there are ten successive versions. To date. Yes. The thing to be said, *say* it.

INTERVIEWER

This immense, abrupt change. The late poetry—

GRAVES

Yes, that came when I was writing *The White Goddess*. (I wrote it in six weeks. It took me ten years to revise it. And I about tripled its length.) Suddenly I was answering ancient Welsh and Irish questions that had never been answered, and I didn't know how or why. It terrified me. I thought I was going mad. But those solutions haven't been disproved. Then someone sent me an article on the Irish tree alphabet, and the footnote referred to

Graves but not to me. It was my grandfather! And I hadn't even known he had investigated such things. I believe in the inheritance of skills and crafts—the inheritance of memory. They find now that if a snail eats another snail it gets that second snail's memory.

INTERVIEWER

How did you sum up such vast detail into your conclusions?

GRAVES

I didn't. I knew it at the outset, and then checked.

INTERVIEWER

You certainly write Muse poetry and express great contempt for the Apollonian, which I take it is the logical or utilitarian stuff, but aren't your novels Apollonian?

GRAVES

My writing of prose was always thematically in line with my thought. Always myself, I never left that. That was always the background. For example, *They Hanged My Saintly Billy* was to show how Victorian England really was: how rotten, how criminal in contrast to the received version. I had a couple of good characters, too, besides the bad.

INTERVIEWER

You write novels when stimulated by some historical problem. How do you go on from there?

GRAVES

I don't know. Some people have gifts, like a friend of mine who can balance a glass on his finger and make it turn round by just looking at it. I have the gift of being occasionally able to put myself back in the past and see what's happening. That's how historical novels should be written. I also have a very good memory for anything I want to remember and none at all for what

I don't want to remember. *Wife to Mr. Milton*—my best novel—started when my wife and I were making a bed in 1943 and I suddenly said: “You know, Milton must have been a trichomaniac”—meaning a hair fetishist. The remark suddenly sprang out of my mouth. I realized how often his imagery had been trichomaniac. So I read all I could find about him and went into the history of his marriages. I'd always hated Milton, from earliest childhood; and I wanted to find out the reason. I found it. His jealousy. It's present in all his poems . . . Marie Powell had long hair with which he could not compete.

INTERVIEWER

I think you describe that precisely in the novel, when they are riding on the heath . . .

GRAVES

He had the schoolmaster's disease. Constipation.

INTERVIEWER

You mean that literally?

GRAVES

Yes! Of course I mean it literally! It shows in all his poetry. We know all about what he was given for it. Well, I had always smelt something, and then it all came to me more or less at once, and I wrote *Wife to Mr. Milton*. I found out a lot of things about him, heaven knows how, which have never been disproved.

INTERVIEWER

Did he inherit the constipation?

GRAVES

He was a scrivener's son. He well may have.

INTERVIEWER

How long did *I, Claudius* take to write?

GRAVES

I, Claudius and *Claudius the God* took me eight months. I had to get the job done quickly because I was £4,000 in debt. I got so close to him that I was accused of doing a lot of research that I had never done at all.

INTERVIEWER

Did you dictate any of it?

GRAVES

No. I had a typist here in the village, but I didn't dictate. If you only use the main sources, and you know the period, a book writes itself.

INTERVIEWER

About how many hours per day did it take you?

GRAVES

I don't know. It must have been seven or eight. The story came to about 250,000 words in all. I had mortgaged the house and didn't want to lose it.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you choose the historical novel?

GRAVES

Well, with that one I had noted in my diary, a year or two before, that the Roman historians—Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dion Cassius, but especially Tacitus—had obviously got Claudius wrong, and that one day I'd have to write a book about it. If I hadn't done so, you wouldn't be here drinking in this house.

INTERVIEWER

What did you have in mind at the end of *Claudius the God*? There's a distinct change in Claudius. One wonders what you were getting at as a novelist.

GRAVES

I didn't think I was writing a novel. I was trying to find out the truth of Claudius. And there was some strange confluent feeling between Claudius and myself. I found out that I was able to know a lot of things that happened without having any basis except that I knew they were true. It's a question of reconstructing a personality.

INTERVIEWER

There is not much direct source extant, though he wrote voluminously.

GRAVES

There's his speech about the Aeduans, his letter to the Alexandrians, and a number of records of what he said in Suetonius and elsewhere. We know now exactly what disease he suffered from: Little's disease. The whole scene is so solid, really, that you feel you knew him personally, if you're sympathetic with him. The poor man—only now, at last, people have begun to forget the bad press he was given by contemporary historians. And he's now regarded as one of the very few good emperors between Julius Caesar and Vespasian.

INTERVIEWER

In the end, though, he was disenchanting—

GRAVES

He saw he could do nothing. He had to give up.

INTERVIEWER

He disintegrated and became very nearly another Caligula or Tiberius . . .

GRAVES

Well, now—Caligula was born bad. Tiberius was a marvelous man. But too much pressure was put on him, and he warned the Senate of what was going to happen. He foresaw a severe psychological breakdown. If you've always been extremely clean—always brushed your teeth and made your bed—and you get to a point of intolerable stress, you break down and display what is called paradoxical behavior: You mess your bed, you do the most disgusting things. Tiberius had been noted for his chastity and manly virtues, and then he broke down. I now feel the greatest possible sympathy for Tiberius.

INTERVIEWER

Weren't you getting at Livy a bit in the novel as a manipulator of truth for effect?

GRAVES

It's a sort of habit in my family, you know. My granduncle was Leopold von Ranke, the so-called father of modern history. He was always held up to me by my mother as the first modern historian who decided to tell the truth in history.

INTERVIEWER

Did that instigate your quest, the shibboleths you've upset to the consternation of many?

GRAVES

You see, there are many people who believe things of which they can't get rid. Suddenly they are faced by some strange fact—such as that God, in the Holy of Holies, had a wife. My friend

Raphael Patai has worked it all out in his *Hebrew Goddess*. It's more than they can stand. But you've got to admit it.

INTERVIEWER

That God had a wife? Did you really mean that?

GRAVES

Indeed he did. It's in the Talmud. Of course the Jews had always kept it rather quiet. At first he was One—but then came the division. You've got to find the focal point. God was a male deity and the focal point was obviously a woman. He couldn't do without one.

INTERVIEWER

How many books have you published?

GRAVES

One hundred and twenty-one—but many of those are revised collections. Then I've written books for other people.

INTERVIEWER

Why have you done that?

GRAVES

Because they had something to say, and they couldn't write it down.

INTERVIEWER

Have you given up writing fiction?

GRAVES

It might happen again. I doubt it, but I don't know. One never knows.

INTERVIEWER

After writing *The Reader over Your Shoulder* with Alan Hodge in 1942—your handbook for writers of English prose—you say that your own style changed completely. Why, or rather how?

GRAVES

Whoever thinks about the English language and tries to discover its principles, and also pulls a whole lot of writers to pieces to show how badly they write, can't afford to write badly himself. In 1957 I entirely rewrote *Good-bye to All That*—every single sentence—but no one noticed. Some said: "What a good book this is, after all. How well it's lasted." It hasn't lasted at all. It's an entirely new product. One of those computer analyses of style couldn't possibly decide that my historical novels were all written by the same hand. They're completely different in vocabulary, syntax, and language level.

INTERVIEWER

Considering this vast output and all the revision, how much time do you spend writing? Do you write everything by hand?

GRAVES

Yes. Now let me see, *Nazarene Gospel Restored* took me two years. Now that is eight hundred pages of close writing. Yes, it's about—two books a year for fifty years. That's not so much. I have nothing else to do. The score this year is six.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find you can remember the vast research you have collected?

GRAVES

I know where to look.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't it difficult to be here so far from libraries?

GRAVES

I have never worked in a library.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you get all this information?

GRAVES

I don't know. It comes. I am not erudite. In the normal way of being I am not even well read. I am simply well informed in certain areas of my interest.

INTERVIEWER

You have to know the dates of history—the spelling of the Welsh words—

GRAVES

I've got a Welsh dictionary. I've got quite a big classical library.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say the core ideas come first and then you research?

GRAVES

One has the whole vision of the thing—and then one just checks. Cause may not necessarily ordain effect; it may equally be that effect ordains cause—once one has got the whole time thing under control.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do exactly?

GRAVES

Revise the manuscript till I can't read it any longer, then get somebody to type it. Then I revise the typing. Then it's retyped again. Then there's a third typing, which is the final one. Nothing should then remain that offends the eye.

INTERVIEWER

This is for prose?

GRAVES

Yes. But that's no proof that in ten years' time it may not read badly. One doesn't know about prose at the time.

INTERVIEWER

And poetry?

GRAVES

Sometimes you know: "This is right, this is one of the things that stands." You feel there are a certain number of poems that have got to be written. You don't know what they are, but you feel: This is one, and that is one. It is the relation between jewels and the matrix—the jewels come from the matrix, then there's the matrix to prove it. A lot of poems are matrix rather than jewels.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean?

GRAVES

The matrix is partly jewel, partly not jewel. And lots of poems are like that. Those are the ones that usually the public likes best: ones that are not wholly jewels.

INTERVIEWER

Is that because these poems are transitional between generalized views and your personal attitude?

GRAVES

Something like that.

INTERVIEWER

More accessible?

GRAVES

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still experiment with hallucinogens?

GRAVES

I had two trips on the Mexican mushroom back in 1954 or so. None since. And never on LSD. First of all it's dangerous, and secondly, ergot, from which LSD is made, is the enemy of mankind. Ergot is a minute black fungus that grows on rye, or did in the Middle Ages, and people who ate rye bread got manic visions, especially Germans. They now say that ergot affects the genes and might disorder the next generation. It occurs to me that this may explain the phenomenon of Nazism, a form of mass hysteria. Germans were rye eaters, as opposed to wheat eaters like the English. LSD reminds me of the minks that escape from mink farms and breed in the forest and become dangerous and destructive. It has escaped from the drug factory and gets made in college laboratories.

INTERVIEWER

You have spoken of a vision of total knowledge that you once had at twelve—

GRAVES

You probably had a similar vision, and you've forgotten it. It needn't be a vision of anything; so long as it's a foretaste of Paradise. Blake had one. All poets and painters who have that extra "thing" in their work seem to have had this vision and never let it be destroyed by education. Which is all that matters.

INTERVIEWER

You've just finished a new translation of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám. Why did you choose the *Rubáiyát* rather than the work of a purer Sufic poet such as Rumi or Sa'adi?

GRAVES

I was invited to cooperate in the task by Omar Ali-Shah, whose family has possessed the original manuscript since A.D. 1153. That's why. I was in the hospital and very glad of the job to take my mind off hospital routine. Khayyám's original poem was written in honor of God's love and spiced with satires against the Muslim puritans of the day. FitzGerald got it all wrong: he believed Khayyám really was a drunkard, and an unbeliever, not a man who was satirizing unbelievers. It's amazing how many millions have been fooled by FitzGerald. Most of them will hate being undeceived.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that the critics now writing about your *Rubáiyát* fail to understand it because they are not Sufis.

GRAVES

As I said, I can take no credit for the job. I worked from a literal crib by Omar Ali-Shah, who is a Sufi. Not only a Sufi, but his family is in the direct line of descent from the Prophet—and they claim that Mohammed was a Sufi and delivered this secret doctrine to them.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me your Khayyám is more clear and incisive intellectually, whereas FitzGerald—

GRAVES

FitzGerald, you see, was one of those Irishmen at a time when people were ashamed of being Irish and so kept it quiet. And he became a sort of dilettante Englishman. And broke with the poetic tradition of Ireland, which is one of the strongest in the world. I should think after the Persian it is the strongest.

INTERVIEWER

You are talking about the original Irish poetic tradition?

GRAVES

There is only one!

INTERVIEWER

You explained to me once that that was originally Sufi—

GRAVES

Before that it was Milesian Greek superimposed on the archaic Libyan culture of about 2500 B.C. The Milesians came to Ireland via Spain and brought with them the ogham tradition—which is an early form of alphabet, taking us back toward the day when letters originated in the observation of flights of cranes, and so on. But Ireland always remained in contact with Greek-speaking Antioch and not Rome, which was important.

INTERVIEWER

Is the important thing that ogham was preclassical?

GRAVES

That's right. Before Plato. Before the Greeks went wrong. You know, the Jews had a saying—"of the ten measures of folly the

Greeks have nine.” They were all right until about the sixth century B.C. By the time of Alexander the Great they’d gone to pieces altogether.

INTERVIEWER

In what way?

GRAVES

They tried to decry myth. They tried to put in its place what we would now call scientific concepts. They tried to give it a literal explanation. Socrates jokes about myths, and Horace makes fun of them. When put to it, Socrates could clarify a myth in a way that deprived it of all sense. They simply had no use for poetic thought. Logic works at a very high level in consciousness. The academic never goes to sleep logically, he always stays awake. By doing so, he deprives himself of sleep. And he misses the whole thing, you see. Sleep has seven levels, topmost of which is the poetic trance—in it you still have access to conscious thought while keeping in touch with dream . . . with the topmost fragments of dream . . . your own memory . . . pictorial imagery as children know it and as it was known to primitive man. No poem is worth anything unless it starts from a poetic trance, out of which you can be awakened by interruption as from a dream. In fact, it is the same thing.

INTERVIEWER

But where does this itself come from?

GRAVES

From yourself, under the direction of the more-than-you formed by your relation with the person with whom you are in rapport at the time. If anybody were really observant, he’d be able to take a poem and draw a picture of the person it was addressed to.

INTERVIEWER

In looking at the beloved, do you then see yourself most clearly—as distinct from looking at yourself?

GRAVES

Yes. Otherwise it's not you.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about honors and laureateships? Will you accept if the laureateship is offered to you?

GRAVES

I don't answer questions about conjectures. I don't want any honors, but I wouldn't so much mind being honored for writing novels which sell abroad and earn money for England. Writing poems is different. To get a C.B.E. for being a poet would be absurd. But the government always tries to coax well-known writers into the Establishment; it makes them feel educated . . . I refuse doctorates because they suggest that one has passed some sort of academic test. Accepting the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford was different—it's a free election.

INTERVIEWER

In your last and most violent lecture at Oxford you said there were no poetic standards left. It is rare for you to make generalizations of this sort. Do you feel that "pop" poetry is inconsistent with dedication to the Muse?

GRAVES

There are no standards of verse-craft left, I think I said. Genuine folk songs are welcome, but why those artificial songs of protest? There are few now, if any, who go to the real root of the thing. Fewer, since Frost and Cummings died.

INTERVIEWER

What about your own poetic influences, apart from the Tudor poet Skelton and Laura Riding?

GRAVES

“Influence” is a very loose term. It sounds as though one is being dominated by someone. I never wrote anything in Laura Riding’s style as far as I know. I learnt from her a general attitude to things, rather than verse-craft.

INTERVIEWER

Is it that what you get from successive incarnations of the Muse?

GRAVES

Yes, but in the form of warnings rather than instructions.

INTERVIEWER

May I ask you about the way you work? You don’t have a routine, do you?

GRAVES

None. I admit only to a certain sense of priority in things. This morning, for instance, I got up at seven. I felt drawn to the ash pit where I burn waste paper and sieved out all the tins and things which have been mistakenly put there. Then I put the ash on the compost heap. Then I soaked the carrot patch so that I could thin it out a bit. Then I revised my “Monsters” piece.

INTERVIEWER

You write in longhand, on a sort of lectern . . .

GRAVES

That’s because I broke my neck once. When the doctor asked me how, I couldn’t remember until just the other day. It was when I was climbing Snowdon in 1914. I was belayed in a gully when

the leader dislodged a large stone: It fell on my head and knocked me out. The other day I had almost exactly the same experience and so remembered the occasion. Now my neck is—well, I wrote a poem about it: “Broken Neck.”

INTERVIEWER

Does most of your income come from royalties on your novels?

GRAVES

I don't know, really. I never study my royalty returns.

INTERVIEWER

You said you only read for information. What do you read, and when do you get time?

GRAVES

I used to read at night; now I go straight to sleep. I don't read for pleasure. The other day I had to revise *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* for publication in Hungary, which meant a good deal of research.

INTERVIEWER

You said, “I foresee no change for the better in the world until everything gets worse.” Well, now it *is* worse. Can we do anything about it?

GRAVES

Poets can't march in protest or do that sort of thing. I feel that it's against the rules, and pointless. If mankind wants a great big final bang, that's what it'll get. One should never protest against anything unless it's going to have an effect. None of those marches do. One should either be silent or go straight to the top. Once this village was without electricity for three months because the local system had broken down and the provincial company was scared of putting a pylon on the land of an old noblewoman,

whose son was a Captain-General and who said that the spot was sacred to St. Catalina Tomás, the island's patron saint. I went to Madrid to see the Minister of Information and National Tourism and told him: "The local hotels will be empty this summer for lack of electricity." He kindly informed our Civil Governor that the pylon should be put up regardless of the Saint's feelings. But it's different if one can't go to the top. I regret the war in Vietnam, but marching won't stop it, and there is no one person, like our Minister in Madrid, who can control this complex situation.

INTERVIEWER

Does this disturb you?

GRAVES

Civilization has got further and further from the so-called natural man, who uses all his faculties: perception, invention, improvisation. It's bound to end in the breakdown of society and the cutting down of the human race to manageable size. That's the way things work; they always have. My hope is that a few cultural reservations will be left undisturbed. A suitable place might be certain Pacific Islands and tracts in Siberia and Australia, so that when the present mess is over, the race of man can restore itself from these centers.

INTERVIEWER

Who will be on the reservations? Who'll decide?

GRAVES

The people who are already there. They should be left. The Melanesians, for instance, and the paleo-Siberians.

INTERVIEWER

Has your living here in Deyá, isolated from what you call the modern mechanarchic civilization, gradually led to what you call handcraft in your poetry?

GRAVES

I once lived here for six years without moving out. That was in the years 1930–1936. Didn't even go to Barcelona. Apart from that, I've always made a point of traveling. One's got to go out because one can't live wholly in oneself or wholly in the traditional past. One's got to be aware of how really nasty urban life is.

INTERVIEWER

But you take in much less by osmosis than if you were T.S. Eliot at the bank?

GRAVES

Obviously I do.

INTERVIEWER

You are constantly revising your collected poems. Why?

GRAVES

I realize from time to time that certain poems were written for the wrong reasons and feel obliged to remove them; they give me a sick feeling. Only the few necessary poems should be kept. There's no mystery about them: If one is a poet, one eventually learns which they are. Though, of course, a perfect poem is impossible. Once it had been written, the world would end.

