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The Other: For Good and For Ill

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I recently received an email message from a friend who has been invited to participate as have I, in the first session of the Durrell Summer School in Corfu in June of 2002. Some participants have expressed concern about traveling during this time of threat and danger. My colleague wrote that instead of not traveling, we should include "an extensive reflection on the notion of travel as "encountering the 'Other' ". Her correction is, of course, right as far as it goes. But to confront the other is not necessarily to learn about ourselves, as that ubiquitous other, the Trickster, even in the darkest of modes, justifies changing our security into confusion and despair. Those who learn must be able to reflect; and ideally, neither the other nor the traveler is destroyed. And Trickster will always be with us, the constantly morphing sign in the semiosphere of myth and history, an ombudsman reiterating the refrains, "What you see is not what you get" and "I told you so".

In *Beowulf*, that early story of colonization, the hero braves a difficult journey to attempt a perilous challenge, a feat worthy of his mettle. He is to rid the neighboring clan's recently settled territory of an invading creature wreaking primitive violence on the gathering of warriors who came to this "new found land," as John Donne said about another explorer. Seamus Heaney describes the creature, Grendel:

Suddenly then
The God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses. (120-125)

As a poet who came of age during the violence of the Troubles that began in Ulster (or Northern Ireland if you prefer) in 1969, Heaney knows well what dangers can come from the dark, knows well that the other may not be simply another point of view, a humorous pitard on which we can be hoisted. The last part of Ireland in the United Kingdom, the six northern counties, known as Ulster, have for centuries been the scene of confrontations between two groups, Catholic and Protestant in the most simplistic of distinctions. Each sees its opponent as the other, never as a possible mirror image. In "Dockery," an early poem, Heaney presents the heart of the problem: a working class Northern Protestant who will drop a hammerlike fist on a Catholic and only tolerates a

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collar on his "sleek pint of porter" *Death of A Naturalist* 41). The violence here comes from a man for whom the past lives as a threat to destroy him and all he and his predecessors have built through domination and settling. After the Siege of Derry in 1690 when the Protestant residents outlasted the army of James II and after the Battle of the Boyne in 1691 when the army of James was beaten by the army of William of Orange, an uneasy period of peace keeping settled over Ulster. There never has been a peace, just peace keeping or an attempt to restrict the violence. The yearly Protestant marches through Catholic areas of Derry and Belfast have commemorated the conquest and survival dating from the 1690s and have served to remind the Catholics that they are a subject people and that their own particular other will keep them subject.

Even among the most civil and most decent of those who won the uneasy peace, no self-reflection occurs. In another early poem, "The Other Side," Heaney recalls a neighboring Protestant farmer, who though friendly, was bemused by Catholicism:

'Your side of house, I believe,
hardly rule by the book at all.'

His brain was a whitewashed kitchen
Hung with texts, swept tidy
As the body o' the kirk. (*Opened Ground* 60)

Neither "side" could do more than see the differences. What they learned about themselves, they learned from their own kind. As Heaney shows, he learned more about himself than he, or any of us, would care to know. In "Punishment," he sees as sisters the body of a ritually killed woman, recently found in an archeological dig, and the women in Ulster accused of collaboration, who with shaved heads and tarred bodies are chained weeping to public fences. And he stood by in silence, "the artful voyeur":

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge. (*Opened Ground* 118)

Confronted by violence, characteristic of that done against his kind, Heaney is shaken from the belief in the unquestioned rightness of the Catholic cause. The poet, and most of us, learn the nature of our courage in such moments. As Heaney wrote in a very early poem, "Digging":

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it. (*Opened Ground* 4)

Knowledge of the self, perhaps unfortunately, is as dependent on discovery as is knowledge of past civilizations: something new and perhaps unsettling can always be unearthed.

For Heaney to look into the Anglo-Saxon past is, perhaps, to claim a basic text in English literature for the literary language he, following Joyce, has made the most significant and powerful form of English as a literary language in the last, and probably this, century. Be that as it may. Certainly Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* reiterates what he made clear in his 1974 volume of poetry, *North: Ireland*, especially Ulster, was born of the clan structure of Northern Europe. For us, as well as the Irish, to understand the present Troubles and the culture of Ireland, we must see and accept who they are. For they learn of identity from themselves, not from the other. Though conceptions of the self come from our communities, the unseating of them has the same source: cultural identity failing to meet the demands of experience.

By the end of the poem, Beowulf may have come to understand that as he destroyed the other, so too will he be destroyed. That is questionable, though, since the hero is not reflective and, thus, not inclined to be curious about what he destroyed in his youthful pursuit of fame and pleasure. For such reflection, we best go to John Gardner's novel *Grendel*. There the rough beast resembles Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, frightening in appearance but forced into violence. As a child, Grendel went with his hurts to his mother, romped in the woods, and enjoyed life. His life was uncritical and unexamined. He did not need to justify occupying the forest, unlike in Gardner's view, the warriors who settled the land to bring civilization, as Grendel reflects after a raid on the mead hall:

"Theories," I whisper to the bloodstained ground. So the dragon once spoke. ("They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories!" I recall his laugh. (13)

One could complain that Gardner takes liberties, even violates the text of the poem, unless, of course, one has been colonized in the name of civilization or history or religion, unless one has endured the prattle of theory brats who reinvent the meaning of quite clear literature in the name of culture. For such as these, Gardner's Grendel reclaims a cultural possibility: that Grendel had as much reason to be angered by his new neighbors as does anyone who lives next to members of a teenage rock band or shares an office with someone bent on deconstructing literature in the name of the ever-changing *deus loci* of criticism.

The reflection induced by Gardner's shaggy and reflective beast leads, though, to deeper and more troubling self-examination: how our own cultural expansion appears to residents where we have gone. A Spanish friend said to me: "American must accept that democracy is not the only form of government". I am not saying that *Beowulf* is an early text of globalization, but we can learn from it. If we accept as inevitable the expansion of western culture, we must as well expect the violence that will accompany it. Trickster grown old and a bit weary may well be unable in times such as these to lead us to understand, not just confront, the other. Yet without such reflection, we can never understand our own goals and the nature of our opponents.

Bringing us to confront the other is a game the Trickster plays. Always we are confronted with the frailty of our realities, sometimes through violence and always through the unexpected. For how can we expect what we cannot anticipate? And in a

reality driven and constrained to Aristotelean reason and predictability, the unpredictable, the unreasonable cannot be anticipated because it cannot be imagined. In our secular culture, the blinding bolt of mystical experience, which wrenches one by the hair from all that is known, belongs to the past, to a time of the desert fathers who went without food or drink or sleep for a week, tying their hair to the ceiling to stay awake. Even people among us who have felt the pull on their hair, who have had their life utterly changed, tell of the experience as a rhetorical one: in figurative language if poets, in tediously annotated studies if scholars. To do otherwise is to be thought mad.

Well known as poet, novelist, and scholar, Robert Graves has twice been included in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*: for "Good-Bye To All That," the title of his early memoir, and for "The White Goddess," his study of "the historical grammar of poetic myth". Actually, *The White Goddess* establishes a historical basis for his early mystical experience of the goddess.

Badly shell-shocked in World War I and grievously wounded (presumed dead) at the battle of the Somme, Graves found his world of public schools, the quietness of the family home in Wales, and all that rocked off their Aristotelean foundations. *Poetic Unreason* and *The Meaning of Dreams*, his early critical studies, as well as *Good-Bye To All That*, delineate his loss of faith in the power of reason, the viability of predictability. He had a "nightmarish" train right after he was wounded, lying with unchanged bandages on the same stretcher for five days and for the rest of his life boarded a train with trepidation. He had been shocked by a trench telephone and for the rest of his life refused to have a telephone in his home. The voice of Trickster would probably have come from it to remind him that what he had believed in had gone terribly awry. The faces of dead comrades who rode on the necks of passersby on the streets of London said, as did the ghosts who walked the trenches in France, that reason has no answer. So he turned to depth psychology as developed by Dr. W.H.R. Rivers and believed that when the threat of war no longer existed, he would no longer wake up screaming at night. The threat went away, and he still screamed at night.

Gradually there emerged in his life and poetry a powerful figure on whom he was utterly dependent: a feminine power, compelling and unpredictable. In his poems she, at times, appeared as a homicidal succubus, as a figure only to be presented in unfamiliar imagery, as (perhaps) his first wife, the strained and stressed Nancy Nicholson. She has much in common with John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," does this divinity of Graves's. For Keats, also, found despair, unpredictability, and beauty in one being:

VII

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
I love thee true'.

VIII

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept and sigh'd full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes

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With kisses four

IX

And there she lulled me asleep
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe bsetide!
The latest dream I everdream'd
On the cold hill side.

X

I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all,
They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath these in thrall! (48)

Keats never discussed the experience of fairy as real and mystical, probably for the same reason Graves didn't for a very long time. As Catherine Dalton, daughter of Robert and Nancy, told me, he experienced the Goddess early but did not speak of it lest he be thought mad. Keats, in trouble with critics already already, certainly didn't want to be thought mad to boot.

Reading Graves's early poems, closely and seriously, as I wrote my study of them *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves*, I had the uneasy feeling I was missing the keystone, an admission supporting the pillars of his praise of woman as other (beyond simplistic answers) and his dependence on woman as more powerful than he. When I asked Beryl Graves, his widow, when Robert first acknowledged the Goddess, she sent me "A History":

The Palmist said: "In your left hand, whichshews your inheritance the Line of Head dips steeply toward Luna. In your right hand, which shews your development, there is a determined effort to escape into less melancholy thinking." I said nothing, butshewed him this sonnet:

When in my first and loneliest love I saw
The sun swim down in tears to meet the sea,
When woods and clouds and mountains massed their awe
To whelm the house of torment that was me,
When spirits below the cromlech heard me pass
Belling their hate with such malignant cries
That horror and anguish rustled through the grass
And the very flowers glared up with oafish eyes.
Then round I turned where rose the death-white Fay
And knew her well that exercised her wand,
That spurred my heart with rowellings day by day
To the very reach of madness and beyond,
Thee, moon, whom now I flout, by thought made bold,
Naked, my Joseph's garment in thy hold. (*Collected Poems* 3: 3300-331)

Graves published this poem in 1924. It was not reprinted in his lifetime, appearing only in his posthumously published collected works. For Graves "the death-white Fay,"

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his first recorded experience of the Goddess, destroyed the paradox of fear and awe. She was inescapable and desired reality, turning rhetoric into fact.

Whether Graves experienced the Goddess or in a state of trance or not did is not really my concern. Of importance is that his wounding, what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, enabled him to experience the other. That woman as muse and Goddess assumed the characteristics of battle is also not my concern. I come not to psychoanalyze Graves but to explain him. In battle, Graves lost control over his freedom to choose, even lost control over whether he would live or die. Raised in the late Victorian world of public peace and decorum, Graves was not prepared, and who would be, for the battle of the Somme and, later, for the sexuality of marriage. As he said to me, he was a virgin until he was married. The trauma of war found a new body in the trauma of sex: he gave control over his life and love to the woman. Both war and woman were outside his experience and made him aware that he could not control his reality by reason. He may have come to understand the woman as matriarch and goddess, though chauvinists of both genders have shrilly condemned him and his rejected his assertion in the poem "To Juan At The Winter Solstice" that the one story worth the poet's telling is that of the Goddess and her reign: the matriarchal and matrilinear society Graves believed to be the that basic to Indo-European culture.

This Goddess has three forms: mother, lover, layer out (all of which Oedipus would have recognize even in their disguise in the play by Sophocles), though Freud's version of his story would puzzle him. What Graves did was to find historical precedent for his mystical experience. Death becomes irrationally tied to love, and the traumas that so troubled Graves are accommodated. The predictable world of an English schoolboy having been shattered by violence, the boy become a man is granted meaning. Trickster, here, is not really the other and probably never is. Instead, Trickster functions as does the Irish god Bricriu, the maker of discord. When whatever reason gives viability to belief and structure is questioned or overturned, there is Trickster. Caught in this vortex of emotions, few of us stop to reflect and choose a path. Lovers are probably the ones most likely to be swept mindlessly along by emotions. For instance, Lawrence Durrell's Darley, who narrates three volumes of *The Alexandria Quartet*, sees all life in terms of his passion for Justine—until he learns that he is merely a red herring, a public distraction while she spins other deceptions. When he reflects on the last time he saw her, he recalls a crone with her nose approaching her chin. Unable to reflect, he is also unable to choose a path for his future. The he will write a story, as he begins to do at the end of *The Quartet*, I doubt he will be able to reflect. Instead, he will be like an acquaintance of mine who said to me: "People who knew my first wife are shocked when they meet my second wife, who is attractive and intelligent. Whereas my first wife was ugly and stupid". We are not by nature objective, as Trickster makes all to clear.

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