Graves’ Disease?

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2015)

Robert Graves (1895 – 1985) was one of the few men who was able to read his own obituary, albeit sixty-nine years before he actually died. He was badly injured in the First World War and left for dead; the *Times* published an obituary on this mistaken belief.

His most famous books are his memoir of that war, *Good-bye to All That*, published in 1929, a title that captures in four words the profound change wrought by that cataclysm; and *I, Claudius*, an historical novel, published in 1934, that was turned into a very successful television drama serial. But he was a man of many parts, who wrote among other things a slim volume with the title *Lars Porsena: On the Future of Swearing*. I doubt he realised just how prosperous the future of swearing would be, in quantity if not necessarily in quality.

His personal life was colourful, to say the least; he lived for many years and died on the island of Majorca, and was the subject of this amusing clerihew:

> When Robert Graves
> Misbehaves,
> It’s the talka
> Majorca.

For some people, at least, he was an inexhaustible subject of conversation.

Graves thought of himself as primarily a poet. One of his last volumes, *Poems 1968 – 1970*, seems full of foreboding about his impending descent into dementia, which he suffered for at least the last ten years of his life. In *The Imminent Seventies* he writes:

> Are not all centuries, like men,
>
> Born hopeful too and gay,
>
> And good for seventy years, but then
>
> Hope slowly seeps away?

This was written, of course, before the English language was deprived of the word *gay* in any but its present sense, all other senses being as finally extinguished as the first name Adolf throughout Europe and the world.

Graves gives us a version of Shakespeare's seventh age of man, that:

> … second childishness and mere oblivion,
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Graves' version goes:

> True, a new geriatric art
>
> Prolongs our last adventures
>
> When eyes grow dim, when teeth depart:
>
> For glasses come, and dentures –

And indeed Graves, who had written 140 books, wrote no more in the last ten years of his life.

The only consolation for Grave was that fame in old age no longer invited envy or backbiting. He ends *Troublesome Fame*, about the pitfalls and difficulties that much sought-after but oft-regretted commodity, by the following stanza:

> But Fame attendant on extreme old age
>
> Falls best. What envious youth cares to compete
>
> With a lean sage hauled painfully upstage,
>
> Bowing, gasping, shuffling his frozen feet –
>
> A ribboned hearse parked plainly down the street?

There is one poem in the collection that particularly caught my attention, and that intersected with my clinical interests, called *Man of Evil*. This is a poem – not, I think great poetry – about that hero of an ever-growing number of films, the psychopath. How are we to conceive of evil, a word that many philosophers have declared redundant, as doctors have declared redundant the word hysteria, but which returns like the proverbial bad penny, and that we are strangely unable to do without?

Graves starts with a question:

> But should I not pity that poor devil,
> Such a load of guilt he carries?

This might seem at first sight contradictory, for it is one of the principal characteristics of the psychopath that he feels no guilt. That, after all, was why the British physician, John Cowles Prichard, coined the term ‘moral insanity’ for it. The sufferer from this condition, or at least the person who made others suffer from it, seemed to be perfectly normal in his mentation except for an absence of moral sense – an absence which, of course, affected his emotional responses to events.

But in my experience, at least, such people are aware of the moral judgments of others and can enumerate moral principles as well as the next man; they are just unable to feel them from the inside, as it were, they cannot experience them. They are like a critic who mouths enthusiasm for something without feeling it, because he knows that the weight of critical opinion is in its favour. To break ranks is dangerous.

In that sense, then, the psychopath may bear a weight of guilt: he has to explain away his evil deeds to an audience who, for some reason unknown to him, seems to demand an explanation. Graves gets this right: having enumerated the protagonist’s deeds – debauching the daughter of his benefactor, drug-dealing, a first wife driven mad, a second drowned in a pond in mysterious and unelucidated circumstances – the psychopath then explains, or explains away:

> He complains always of his luckless childhood
>
> And fills commiserating eyes with tears…
>
>
> He cowers and sponges when his guilt is plain
>
> And his bank-account runs dry.
>
> O, that unalterable black self-pity,
>
> Void of repentance or amendment,
>
> Clouding his Universe!

But in the midst of this, Graves tells us that:

> The truth is: he was evil from the womb
>
> And both his parents knew it.

And certainly I have met people who, as soon as they were able to exercise conscious choice, opted always for the worst. They were cruel to animals, put cats in the washing machine and acid in the goldfish bowl, lied for no reason except for the pleasure of deceit, and in general pursued a mirror-image of Kant's categorical imperative. In so far as at least some of these individuals were brought up in a normal way, not different from their siblings who were in no way psychopathic, their propensity to evil seemed to be, if not genetic, at least congenital. And if it were, could they be called evil? Graves' title, *Man of Evil*, suggests that the deeds rather than the person who commits them is where the evil lies: although he had long given up his Christian faith (lost in the First World War), enough remained for him to distinguish in his heart between the sin and the sinner.

For a man himself to *be* evil, he has to choose to do evil in spite of knowing it to be wrong and be capable of not doing it. *Ex hypothesi*, the man outlined above is not evil – he is, as Dr Prichard would have called him, *morally insane*. For him, evil is as the flame to the moth: and who blames moths? Such men are not many (there are even fewer women of this ilk), but they exist.

Are there any that do evil, or even wrong, knowingly? Socrates thought not, that wrongdoing was the result of ignorance. If we but knew the right, we should do it. This is against the experience of the vast majority of mankind, most of which will have done wrong knowingly and which will have known others to have done wrong knowingly.

The humble activity of clearing up the roadside also proves that Socrates was mistaken: it is not ignorance that leads people to do wrong, but the placing of minor convenience or pleasure above all other considerations that does so.

My wife and I, tired of waiting for the council to do its duty and clean the lanes around our beautiful little town of litter, have taken to cleaning them ourselves. It is futile in a way, for the task is far too great for us alone: we can clear about 200 yards on both sides of the road in 45 minutes, thereby gathering two substantial sacks of litter. It is not unsatisfying work though, for it is far from unpleasant if the weather is clement and the result is immediately visible.

The point is, however, that many people have gone to the trouble to insinuate their litter deep into the hedge-row, from which it is difficult to retrieve it; moreover, they almost certainly have waited until there was no one around to see them do it. In other words, they knew perfectly well that what they were doing was wrong, but chose to do it anyway.

The people who behave in this way, I suspect, are not at all the type of people I have

described above. They are far too numerous for that, and if all the people who did it were true psychopaths the murder rate would be a hundred or a thousand times higher than it is. Having more of a choice, then, than those who suffer from congenital moral insanity, are they in fact worse people than the latter? Their crimes are less serious but more numerous. How many small crimes make a large one? If there is no common unit of badness, so that, for example, one murder without extenuation would equal a thousand Hitler units, while dropping a chocolate wrapper would equal one Hitler unit, such that a thousand dropped wrappers would equal one murder, how could one ever compare, at least scientifically, the badness of acts? If the answer is moral intuition, the door to relativism is opened: for my moral intuition is not the same as yours and may even be diametrically opposed to it. Whose intuition is to prevail? And yet, when we say that a certain action is bad, we are not merely saying *I don't approve of it*: we believe, on the contrary, that we are making a judgment that corresponds to a reality independent of our mental state.

All these problems are too difficult for me, I gave up on them a long time ago, only for Graves' poem to come along and resuscitate them in my mind.

His last stanza seems to me interesting, if slightly confused. It goes:

> But who can cast out evil? We can only
>
> Learn to diagnose that natal sickness,
>
> The one known cure for which, so far, is death.
>
> Evil is here to stay unendingly,
>
> But so also is Love.

When Graves asks who can cast out evil, he seems to be referring to the whole of Mankind, in effect to Original Sin. Clearly it is unrealistic to expect a human existence without evil, for even if we are not born to it, exactly, we are certainly born to the capacity for it. As to those – few in number – who seem to be born to nothing else, death is not always the only cure: they seem sometimes to mature out of their moral insanity.

But the last two lines are the most curious: for in them Graves opposes not good to evil, but love. And in doing so, he is very modern indeed, despite his age at the time and the fact that he grew up an Edwardian.

A lack of love may certainly be a psychological source of evil where it is not congenital; but

that does not mean that love is itself the antonym of evil, either in common parlance or in philosophy. It might be difficult to imagine a person who could not love to be capable of doing right, but that does not mean that love is coterminous with the good. Indeed, it is perfectly possible to imagine people doing evil for the sake of love. Indeed, *An Evil Love* is the title of a book written about Fred and Rose West, two notorious serial killers, who kidnapped young women to torture them sexually and then kill them.

The opposition of love to evil in effect empties the notion of good of almost all its rational quality, for it is notorious that love is like the wind, it bloweth where it listeth. If love justifies actions and makes them necessarily good, then to be good is merely an emotional state. And this is very gratifying because it requires no discipline at all, no suppression of inclinations, so long as they can be said to arise from love.

In another poem, *In the Name of Virtue*, Graves says:

> Virtue is from listening
>
> To a private angel,
>
> An angel overheard
>
> When the little-finger twitches –
>
> The bold little-finger
>
> That refused education:
>
> When the rest went to college
>
> And philosophized on Virtue,
>
> It neither went nor tried.

How easy life becomes when virtue consists of listening to your inner angel!

> Knowing becomes doing
>
> When all you need to know
>
> Is how to check our pendulum
>
> And move the hands around

For a needed golden instant…

Are poets the unacknowledged legislators of the world?

Theodore Dalrymple’s latest book is