

"He Alone on this Isotonic Plain": Robert Graves, Keidrych Rhys, Lynette Roberts, and the situation of the poet in war

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**‘He alone on this isotonic plain’:
Robert Graves, Keidrych Rhys, Lynette
Roberts, and the Situation of the Poet in War**
Charles Mundy

In the summer of 1941 the poet, soldier, and editor Keidrych Rhys submitted a proof copy of his forthcoming wartime anthology *Poems from the Forces* to BBC Talks for their consideration as a subject for radio broadcast.¹ His groundbreaking book helped define for the first time a distinct group of writers who shared direct military experience of World War II as common subject matter, and it was characteristic of Rhys, by this point a practised publicist, to seek its broad promotion in this way. By so doing he was entering into a complex engagement with literary politics, the ramifications of which still have a bearing on how the poets and poetry of World War II are received and apprehended. In negotiating such politics he began a correspondence with Robert Graves, a correspondence which was to extend also to Rhys’s wife Lynette Roberts, and which continued for over a decade, engaging variously with the contingencies of war, poetry, mythology, and the genesis of Graves’s *The White Goddess*. This article explores their correspondence in context, and examines its bearing on the situation of poetry and the poet during and immediately after World War II.

Rhys was born in 1913 into a Welsh-speaking non-conformist farming family in Bethlehem, Carmarthenshire, but he moved away from farming, by way of a short-lived career in banking, into literature. From the mid-1930s onwards he divided his time between rural Wales and bohemian literary London, and by 1937 he had established a reputation in London political and poetry circles. In the same year he launched the seminal Anglo-Welsh magazine *Wales* from his parents’ Penybont farmhouse, opening the first issue in apocalyptic and revolutionary mood with his friend Dylan Thomas’s ‘Prologue to an Adventure’: ‘As I walked

through the wilderness of this world, as I walked through the wilderness, as I walked through the city with the loud electric faces.'² At the start of the war Rhys married the Argentinian artist and poet Lynette Roberts, who had been working as a florist in London under the name of Bruska. She was herself of Welsh descent, and together they set up home in Llanybri, a small rural hamlet in Carmarthenshire. In July 1940 Rhys was called up to the army, and was subsequently stationed at various locations as an anti-aircraft gunner with different regiments.

Rhys was at war, but not only as a gunner in the army. In his 'Introduction' to *Poems from the Forces*, written in August 1941 and published in September, Rhys was typically combative, opening up an attack on a literary-cultural front by taking direct and explicit issue with the editorial line at Cyril Connolly's then-dominant *Horizon* magazine:

Indeed, there is not much to be said about Art and Literature during the last two years: they are perishing of dreary pernicious anaemia. The pre-war, editorial-chair attitude of *Horizon's* editor is almost typical: and has much to do with the tame journalistic-values that still govern the unflourishing, unchanging state of letters in liberal England. Here are some of his gems: 'War is the enemy of creative activity and writers and painters are right and wise to ignore it.'³

This particular gem was from Connolly's 'Comment' in *Horizon*, May 1940, and, in quoting it so scornfully, Rhys was taking on some of the heavyweights of the current literary establishment, whom he labels as a collective of 'icy liberals' (p. xiv). Rhys's suspicion, conveyed to Robert Graves in a private and still unpublished letter, was that the 'icy liberals' had been passing his anthology amongst themselves, from Louis MacNeice via BBC Talks, to J. R. Ackerley at the *Listener* and Connolly and Stephen Spender at *Horizon*, and that it had acted as a catalyst for their collective revival of a debate about the absence of war poetry in

this war. Up to this point the debate had seen sporadic outbreaks in such diverse outlets as the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Daily Express* and *Horizon* itself, and Rhys may or may not be correct about the role of his anthology in rekindling it. It is, however, true that the argument was resurrected in both *Horizon* and the *Listener* in October 1941, and in ways which were not wholly supportive of the creative work of those who were directly involved in the war effort and who felt, unlike Connolly, that war and creativity were not enemies but potential allies. Rhys's 'Introduction' expresses further indignation about the way in which *Horizon* treated a letter by the Welsh Officer and author Goronwy Rees, which countered Connolly's early position on literature and war. Published in *Horizon*, July 1940, and declared of sufficient importance to displace that month's 'Comment', the letter forces an editorial response that initially suggests a change in direction: 'we cannot afford the airy detachment of earlier numbers'.⁴ However, Connolly soon restates a division between art and war in the same editorial:

It is certain that Eliot is better employed writing *East Coker* than as a brother officer of Goronwy Rees [...]. And the fact remains that war *is* the enemy of creative activity, because the military virtues are in conflict with the creative, and because it is impossible in wartime for most people to concentrate on the values of literature and art. The point which *Horizon* has made is that though this war is being fought for culture, the fighting of it will not create that culture. (p. 533–34)

As Kate McLoughlin points out, however, by October 1941 the publication of a *Horizon* manifesto entitled 'Why Not War Writers?' represented a shift at least from the idea that writing and war were antipathetic.⁵ This manifesto, signed variously by writers including Connolly, Spender, Alun Lewis and George Orwell, argues the case for official war writers in a reserved occupation, an idea that Herbert Read had floated in passing in an

article about the importance of war artists in the *Listener* as far back as July 1940, in which Read sought to extend the allowances made to war artists:

When the present war began, there was [...] a feeling that to some extent artists should be protected from the devastation which the science of war brings to the arts of peace. By artist, of course, was meant graphic artist, particularly the painter and draughtsmen; though logically there does not seem to be any reason why our poets, for example, should not have received a similar official acknowledgment of their existence and their importance during a time of national stress.⁶

Rhys, in alluding to Read's article in the 'Introduction' to his anthology, also makes the plea for official war poets: 'After all, the poet has equal status to that of the artists in the married world of art and literature' (p. xvi).

The debate further escalated in the *Listener*, where in October 1941 Stephen Spender, and then a week later Robert Graves, respected soldier-poet of World War I, published articles explaining the absence of World War II poetry, forwarding their own separate agendas in the process.⁷ Spender's article found the kind of poetry produced during the previous war unfit for contemporary requirements: 'the real need today, as I hope to show, is for a poetry which constructs an ideal, not one which describes horrors'.⁸ Such idealism had apparently not yet emerged, and Spender speculates vaguely as to why this may be so: 'They [unspecified poets] are silent perhaps because they feel that in a world of so much confusion, they cannot dupe people by spreading ideas that lack conviction or are untrue' (p. 540). The rest of his article is a kind of manifesto for politically idealistic writing of the kind that might prefigure a future social revolution.

Graves's argument largely rests on the circumstances of the current war in comparison to World War I, and in this respect his is an historical account, citing differences in relative degrees of

danger, the absence of ‘volunteer pride’ owing to early conscription, the professionalisation of the army, and the relative justification for war and therefore the disparity in opportunities for poetic indignation.⁹ Mechanisation, too, closes down the possibilities of poetic response, with the contentious Gravesian observation that ‘the internal combustion engine does not seem to consort with poetry’ (p. 567). In addition, he identifies a shift in poetic style. World War I poetry

at first had a resolute, self-dedicatory tone but, as the war settled down to a trench deadlock, self-dedication became qualified with homesick regrets for the lovely English countryside, away from all the mud, blood, desolation – the theme of mud, blood and desolation being more and more realistically treated. The close connection between war poetry and Georgian poetry must be emphasised: there was a contrastive interplay between the horrors of trench warfare and the joys of simple bucolic experience. Georgian poetry, in the derogatory sense now always applied to it, was bucolic joy that had lost its poignancy when the war eventually ended. (p. 566)

He was to return to this question of ‘style’ in the ‘Additional Comment’ (1949) appended in *The Common Asphodel*:

Even if they felt ambitious ‘to be war poets,’ the tortuous modernistic fashions in which they had been writing before their conscription were unsuited to the higher journalism which war poetry essentially is; and they disdained writing in the simpler styles which had served the poets of World War I.¹⁰

That he has Keidrych Rhys and his contemporaries most directly in mind in this respect is flagged up by his singling out of Rhys’s two anthologies in the same commentary: ‘Re-reading *Poems from the Forces* (1941), *More Poems from the Forces* (1943), and

individual volumes of poetry published since by soldiers, sailors and airmen, I have come to the conclusion that Alun Lewis was the only poet of consequence who served and wrote in World War II' (p. 311). It is clear that in 1941 Graves wanted to leave his own 'war poems' behind as 'too obviously written during the war poetry boom' (*Listener*, 'War Poetry in this War', p. 566). Graves aligns himself with the sentiments of the press in order to negotiate a fundamental scepticism about 'war poetry', to see it as a specific genre made possible by the circumstances of one war alone, and indeed one poetic style alone, and to reinforce ways in which certain kinds of 'modernistic' stylistic choices might hinder poetry, as might any kind of engagement with examples of mechanistic modernity such as an aeroplane. For Graves, there are ostensibly more important subjects for poetry than war, and if poetry and war are not at this stage wholly antithetical, the closing section of his article makes it clear that poetic effort and attention might best be located in a different subject matter. On the lasting significance of this article Helen Goethals has commented: 'Though some of Graves's assertions were only half-truths, his historical explanation was convincing enough to become the general bedrock, even today, of all comparative accounts of the poetry of the two world wars.'¹¹

The occasion of these articles provided the impetus for Keidrych Rhys to write to Robert Graves for the first time in September 1941. Advance proof copies of both Spender's and Graves's *Listener* articles had been sent to Rhys in order to elicit his opinion as editor of *Poems from the Forces*. In his first private letter to Graves, Rhys does his best to praise the article in question, even though it was largely antipathetic to Rhys's project as an anthologist and active soldier-poet writing poems directly about his wartime experiences. He finds common ground, however, by concentrating his attention on Graves's closing observations on the practicalities of paper shortage and the current monopoly of established poets. Rhys wrote to Graves that the *Listener* had asked him to 'weigh in' with a letter, though he suspects that they would not publish the kind of letter he would

like to write.¹² Whilst he praises Graves's understanding and insight at the expense of Stephen Spender's article on the same subject, Rhys takes him up on the point of the relative danger faced by the forces, outlining some of the perils from his own experience as a gunner: 'Surely Anti-Aircraft sites are pretty exposed? The pier-extensions [at] Dover are shelled, bombed, and machine-gunned. It was dangerous even to take a bath in the college' (Rhys to Graves, 18 September 1941).

Rhys, however, was never one to shy away from publicity, and he inevitably did 'weigh in' with a letter, published in the *Listener*, explicitly stating that both Spender and Graves were wrong, and taking issue with Graves's 'Old Sweat attitude' in downplaying the kind of military action and engagement of the current troops. He also pointed out that a considerable body of the 'poetry of flight' already existed.¹³ There are poets, plenty of them, Rhys asserted, and what was needed was 'a new paper' in which to publish them (p. 603). In this he was reiterating his point in the 'Introduction' to *Poems from the Forces*:

Where are our war poets? I suppose I ought to begin by trying to answer the accusation, so commonly met with nowadays: that rhetorical question one has so often heard asked by our Sunday newspapers and public men! The answer, now, must surely be: under your nose.' (p. xiii)

Rhys here is pointedly occupying another of Connolly's own editorial phrases from *Horizon*: 'About this time of year articles appear called "Where are our war poets?" The answer (not usually given) is "under your nose".'¹⁴ Connolly's rhetoric at this point would have been exasperatingly empty for Rhys, with this number of *Horizon* containing only Alun Lewis's 'All Day it has Rained' as a poem by a poet on active service. The implication in the repeated phrase is that this time, with the arrival of the anthology, 'surely', there is substance to the claim.

A robust exchange of letters followed in the *Listener*'s correspondence pages, with Herbert Palmer writing in support of

Rhys's position, Geoffrey Grigson calling Spender's argument 'vapid', and Vernon Watkins accusing Rhys of stealing one of his apothegms.¹⁵ Spender subsequently wrote in to accuse Rhys of hypocrisy, and Rhys replied that he had sent some of his own poems in manuscript to Spender on request, and that Spender was refusing to return them in case Rhys should die in action, so increasing their value. The undignified and increasingly *ad hominem* spat continued until 24 December 1941, when the no doubt delighted editor of the *Listener* drew it to a close.¹⁶

But Rhys had made a practical and largely truthful point: there was no lack of war poets or poetry, but instead a shortage of outlets, with the collapse of much of the small pre-war magazine culture – of which his own magazine *Wales* had been so successful and radical a part from 1937–1939 in its first series – and with the concentration of poetry publishing largely in the hands of three major journals: *Horizon*, the *Listener*, and *New Writing*. These collectively formed a kind of poetry cartel, colluding with each other about who to print, or at least that is how Rhys understood it. There were of course other magazines, and Rhys himself had been published in *Life and Letters Today*, *Now*, *Furioso*, and *Kingdom Come* by this point in the war. Nevertheless he was making a point about wider access to a diversity of writing, and writing by the young, aspiring soldier poets. His scepticism is perhaps justified by the editorial 'Comment' of the December *Horizon*, which clearly identifies a coterie unwilling to expand its own horizons:

Horizon is not a political magazine. [...] Naturally, there is a tendency to associate with the groups of progressive writers in their thirties to which the editors by age and temperament belong [...]. *Horizon* is an adult periodical. It does not exist to give young writers a chance. We regret that so few 'little magazines' are left, but we do not wish their fate to overtake us.¹⁷

Andrew Sinclair's account of the shape and politics of the literary

scene at this point further supports Rhys's suspicions:

'There were not a great number of us,' John Lehmann testified: 'Nearly all who remained knew one another (or very soon got to know one another) personally, and living more or less under siege conditions with very little opportunity of movement far afield, we were continually meeting to discuss together, so that ideas were rapidly absorbed into the general bloodstream.'¹⁸

To be in the club, one had to be the right age, and by unspoken extension, of the right social class, education, location, and temperament. Andrew Sinclair describes a typical John Lehmann soirée, at which could be expected Cyril Connolly, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice, amongst others.¹⁹ Certainly, Rhys was confronting head on, and without much in the way of nuance or tact (the tools of those in the club, but not necessarily those outside of it) some influential literary figures. The literary politics of this involve perceptions surrounding the 'ownership' of poetry, who is supposed to produce it, what kind of poetry they may 'legitimately' produce, and where they produce it from. Rhys found Graves such an amenable correspondent not just because he admired his poetry, but also because of Graves's intellectual and artistic independence, and his status as an unconventional poet existing to one side of the club in question. In addition, he had direct experience of the army and war.

Graves privately came to Rhys's defence in a letter to Alun Lewis, in which he describes the falling out in terms of racial stereotypes:

Your letter came by the same post as one from Keidrych Rhys who has got himself into muddy waters in that *Listener* correspondence. Spender is behaving in a very disgusting way, and really Rhys's fault is, as I have told him, the familiar Welsh fault of over-impulsive warmth: it has landed

him in seeming contradictions which the Sassenach, who is comparatively free of this fault, sees as dishonesty.²⁰

Indeed more large-scale tensions between the English establishment and Wales in general are a consistent theme in Rhys's subsequent private correspondence with Graves. The discourse of margin and centre manifests itself though a variety of related concerns about the socio-economic and cultural status of Wales. The immediate context of this is precisely the exclusivity of the poetry-publishing establishment, such that Rhys was writing to Graves again on 5 November 1941: 'I know it's much too much like a family party of *la haute bourgeoisie* with one or two outsiders to make it look reputable.' In a letter of 10 November Rhys claims that for a period in the 1930s he was leader of the Holborn Communist Party cell, and worked with Julius Lipton, for whose 1936 volume *Poems of Strife* Day Lewis, at that point also a Communist Party member, wrote a Preface. In a subsequent letter of 11 December Rhys writes that he received discouragement from the post-communist Day Lewis in his formal wartime role at the Ministry of Information:

Spender wrote me that my being in uniform robbed him of all sympathy for me! The War Office (Walter Elliot) suggested I try to contradict the no-war-poets articles in the Press long ago, and suggested I write to the MOI. I got a letter (a stiff one from Day Lewis) saying no useful purpose would be served – he also asked me to send the anthology to him for 'voluntary' censorship. Then I found Day Lewis had exploited the no-war-poets lie of the journalists in *Penguin New Writing*! (Rhys to Graves, 11 December 1941)

That one of the war's best known and morally high-minded poems, Day Lewis's 'Where are the War Poets?', first published in February 1941 in Lehmann's *Penguin New Writing*, might have been born out of literary-political manoeuvring is an irony worth contemplating. In the light of his own defending of the 'bad

against the worse',²¹ Rhys was to return to the subject of economic and cultural deprivation which had been on the agenda of *Wales* magazine before the war:

The Welsh people are in a hell of a state this time – bloody apathetic about war effort and I don't blame them considering what they have to put up with in the Press [...]. MPs are spineless – it's just come out that we only got 18 factories of the 3,800 built from 1926–1938 when 26% of Welshmen unemployed [...]. The feeling here is not far removed from that in Ireland in 1916. It's a pity things have been so mishandled. We suffer from inferiority complexes – looked upon as Saxon slaves and cannon fodder, cheap labour. (Rhys to Graves, 19 November 1941)

Whilst at this point Rhys is identifying Welsh apathy, more active resistance to the war was enshrined in the policy of the nationalist party, Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru. Their policy of 'neutrality' in the war was, according to John Davies, drawn up by Saunders Lewis, himself a distinguished veteran of World War I. Political grounds were not considered a legitimate reason for conscientious objection, and several members of the party who upheld the neutral stance by refusing to serve went to prison.²² Saunders Lewis had himself been imprisoned before the war for his act of resistance in setting fire to buildings at the Penrhos aerodrome in order to protest against the imposition of an RAF bombing school in an area critical to Welsh culture and language, and Gerwyn Williams has claimed this act alone 'seems to have had a greater impact and influence upon Welsh-language writers than the Second World War'.²³ Rhys himself wrote a poem in English about these events, making direct connection between politics and Welsh literature and mythology in the process, and publishing it in the second issue of *Wales* (1937):

I want the world to know and understand

All, how the Fire was forced on the Three like royalty.
 Taliesin, Their language they shall keep.²⁴

Rhys rarely aligned himself completely with the organised causes of Welsh nationalism, but his narrative of exclusion and marginalisation in the letter to Graves was clearly felt at both a national, personal, and literary level. As a Welshman with a home in rural Wales, as largely excluded from the ‘establishment’ English literary scene, and deprived of a proper medium through which to communicate with a broader public, Rhys was feeling the indigence of war, and resented being deployed in an army role that was underpaid, dangerous, and least suited to making the most of his considerable talents as a poet and editor. Once again he writes to Graves, revisiting the question of reserved occupation: ‘Yes, I agree with you about the difference between painters and poets. But *all* of both in Wales are digging useless trenches in Army (except for D. T. [Dylan Thomas]) who knows K. Clark’ (Rhys to Graves, 25 November 1941). Nevertheless, Rhys’s ‘useless’ army work was at this point at least providing him not only with subject matter, but also with some opportunity to practise his editorial skills. As he writes in his ‘Introduction’ to *Poems from the Forces*: ‘Some of these poems were perforce read by the hooded light on the gun-layers’ dials of heavy A. A. guns in East Anglia after bombs and incendiaries had been dropping all night around the site. Others “on active service” in an island wilderness after no doubt delighting the censor’ (p. xviii).

Rhys’s anthology had grown out of his final salvo from the first series of *Wales*, which took the form of a ‘Wartime Broadsheet’ of six poems, including a poem by William Empson, later titled ‘Advice’:

Their long experience who all were first
 Would disadvise you to say Now is Hell
 Knowing worst not known while we can still say Worst.²⁵

Given their context, Empson’s closing lines can be taken in part to

be measuring the early situation in World War II against the previous 'hell' of World War I. In order to encourage the continued saying of versions of the 'worst', the broadsheet also included an appeal in small print: 'Support those magazines [...] which are giving our young fighting writers a platform. Whatever your job, send us your next poem! But remember: PAPER is scarce; STAMPS come hard.'²⁶ The anthology comprised contributions forwarded despite this scarcity of paper, and was the concrete riposte to the literary establishment, containing contributions by Timothy Corsellis, Gavin Ewart, Roy Fuller, Alun Lewis, Mervyn Peake, and Alan Rook, amongst several other active servicemen writing in the context of war.

It is likely that Rhys's public combativeness stung the *Listener* into its subsequent and vicious review of the anthology, published under the cloak of anonymity: 'However benevolently disposed one is, this book adds up to next-to-nothing. Gunner Rhys should have realised that – leaving aside considerations of the merits or faults of the last war's poets – the same phenomenon does not usually happen twice in literature.'²⁷ Any reader of the review might have been more tempted by some of the books advertised on the same pages, such as *Wanderings with a Shot Gun* by Major Sir Edward Durand, 'the light-hearted memories of a man who has never been so happy in life as when in the open air with a rod, rifle or horse', or Ethel Mannin's *Common Sense and Morality*.²⁸ With further reference in the review to 'page after page of the dulllest free verse' (p. 216) a subtext begins to emerge, and one that makes more sense of the paradoxically persistent question, 'where are the war poets?' Rhys's answer – 'under your nose!' – is met with the riposte that this is not proper poetry. It seems that for some the question signified nostalgia for a particular kind of poetry, the bucolic-close-to-Georgianism style identified by Robert Graves as characteristic of what was understood by 'war poetry'. Writing in continuation of a modernist idiom was not the right answer to the question. A further review by the same Herbert Palmer who had been supportive of Rhys in the *Listener* debate underlines this sense of stylistic impropriety: 'But it is a very odd

anthology, for it is largely influenced by the modernists.²⁹

E. M. Forster produced a more enlightened and positive response, in a radio broadcast:

As a counterweight to it [Thomas Moul's traditional anthology *The Best Poems of 1941*], I'll give you *Poems from the Forces*, edited by Keidrych Rhys, himself a poet, which is experimental and iconoclastic, and the work of the youngest generation – the generation for whom Auden and Spender are already back numbers.³⁰

In the same broadcast Forster outlined the difficulty of generalising about contemporary war poetry, as it was being produced by what he identifies as five different generations, including the 1914–1918 war poets:

This, as you may have heard, was the war which was to end war, and the poets who fought in it had the faith that however beastly it was, it would not recur. That was *their* soil, and they have never forgotten it, despite later experiences and disillusionment. Several of them are writing to-day – Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden among them. (pp. 177–78)

In defending the younger military generation, Rhys's situation was becoming embattled, and not only by his preference for poetic experimentalism and iconoclasm. His reflections on the state of the nation were related to a growing sense of personal crisis, which came to a head in May 1942. The ensuing events occasioned the first letters from Lynette Roberts to Graves, in which personal and national concerns were restated with a conscious sense for all involved of a World War I history repeating itself:

They made him scrub floors all day ... they put him in a dark dungeon and two of the guard orderlies beat him up.

Physical violence. BUT INSPITE OF ALL THIS ... K. is fit mentally; he writes if he is not given justice he will go on a 28 day starvation diet. (He won't, he's too fond of his food! But nevertheless the spirit is there.)³¹

This is a moment of characteristic humour amid terrible anxiety in a letter from a deeply worried Roberts, concerned about the army's treatment of Rhys in June 1942. In writing to Graves she was addressing a man who understood the privations of war from the perspective of a soldier, and who also had experience of dealing diplomatically with military authorities.

For a significant period of time during late 1941 Rhys had been put on the reserve list, and was back at home in Llanybri. However, in January 1942 he was recalled to active service, and initially posted to Yarmouth. By March 1942 Alun Lewis received 'a very worried letter from Lynette asking me to see Keidrych who is suffering from his hate neurosis and turning his embitterment into insults to her. He's in Yarmouth, 80 miles away'.³² On 14 May Rhys was writing to Glyn Jones, informing him that he had been issued with a tropical pack and topee, and was on the verge of going abroad.³³ On the 25 May 1942 Rhys went absent without leave, surrendering himself after five days, and at the same time delivering, and widely circulating, a declaration of his intention not to serve any longer under his currently intolerable circumstances, in which he invoked the spirit of another famous declaration, whilst gesturing towards a recognition of different contexts:

In the last war Siegfried Sassoon as a fighting poet made a stand against unwarranted slaughter. In this war I feel the same sense of responsibility, but for different reasons. I feel strongly that unless social injustices and financial and mental worries and cruelties are eliminated by his country for whom he is willing to die, the combatant soldier can hardly believe that the State and Authority, who continue to shew him camouflaged indifference, has his real interests at

heart.³⁴

Rhys's generalisations here were grounded in his own very personal example about financial hardship and inappropriate deployment described earlier on in his declaration, where he outlines the impasse: he does not intend to stand out of the war, but he will not continue under his current circumstances. It is at least possible that the threat of posting to a tropical theatre of war influenced Rhys's actions, although in her letter to Graves of 12 June Roberts makes it clear that the decision to make a stand had already been made, and was not an 'outcome' of such a posting.

The same letter indicates that Roberts had previously circulated the declaration to Graves, and to Herbert Read, and she had received supportive responses from both, in different ways. She writes to Graves: 'There is however this difference, you offer constructive advice and see the "stand" not as something "brave and futile", but at a deeper psychological level and have even taken the trouble to analyse K's statement.' Behind the polite phrasing lies the impatience of a letter writer who wants to secure some slightly more practical help than psychoanalysis, in the form of financial support ('a ten bob note to get drunk on. Or a packet of stamps and 8 bob p.o.'), and in using influence with acquaintances in positions of power and authority. In this there is some delicate negotiation. Graves would have been an obvious recipient because of his involvement with Siegfried Sassoon's actions, but Roberts is also keen to stress the differences in context:

I beg of you not to place S Sassoon's case beside K's in your mind. Tear it out. This war is NOT the last; it is an outcome of very deep poison and unhappiness in all humanity. If the economic conditions are *not* seen to very shortly by the state ... there WILL BE CIVIL WAR. Surely you see this, and if you *do*, then SURELY you must approve of K. emphasising the danger which so many of us already know. Things are more serious than perhaps you know.³⁵

Used as we are to the perspectives of hindsight and the popular apprehension of an inviolate cause around which the nation was united, this rhetorically sophisticated address gives a different perspective on versions of unrest, and reinforces once more the perceptions of levels of civil disquiet, at the very least in a Welsh context, that Rhys had already been outlining in the letters to Graves.

At the point of Sassoon's 1917 declaration against World War I, Graves offered warnings and criticism of the action itself, but also friendly, practical support. Indeed it was in large measure Graves's interventions that saw Sassoon go before a sympathetic medical board, and that secured his stay in Craiglockhart Hospital, rather than face likely court martial. These actions also consequently enabled Sassoon's declaration to be largely neutralised by a nevertheless perturbed establishment. Graves's commendable expediency in Sassoon's case may have been replayed in part on behalf of Rhys, and in one respect at least the outcome was similar. Rhys avoided his awaited court martial, and following detention in the main guardroom at the Royal Artillery depot in Woolwich he was sent instead to a military psychiatric hospital in the suburbs of Birmingham.

Sassoon did not know, and would not at the time have approved, of the full extent of Graves's actions on his behalf. Expedient practicality is a sometimes uncomfortable bedfellow to principle, and, in an extraordinarily ambiguous phrase, Rhys writes to Graves from the military hospital: 'Well, you've had your wish. They've dropped all charges against me' (Rhys to Graves, 27 July 1942).

Rhys's period of active service and its dramatic conclusion, and Roberts's domestic wartime experience, are the starting points for her modernist war poem *Gods with Stainless Ears*. The postings away and periods of separation, the falling out and reconciliation, and the declaration that leads to a psychiatric hospital, provide an autobiographical narrative framework around which the poetry and mythology of Roberts's *Gods with Stainless Ears* comes to

complex life. This passage from Part 5, near the conclusion of the poem, explores some of the complexities of life and art towards wartime experience, in a modernist idiom that is recognisably Roberts's own:

A placard to the right which concerned us:

Mental Home for Poets. He alone on this
Isotonic plain: against a jingle of Generals
And Cabinet Directors determined
A stand. Declared a Faith. Entered 'Foreign
Field' like a Plantagenet King: his spirit

Gorsefierce: hands like perfect quatrains.
Green spindle tears seep out of closed lids...
Mourn murmuring...remembering my brother.
His Cathedral mind in Bedlam.³⁶

Here, the character of the soldier-poet, faced with the 'mental home', displays an equanimity, 'alone on this / Isotonic plain'. 'Isotonic' confers the equal measure of the well-tempered scale to his position, which is balanced and proportioned in contrast to the surrounding chaos, and to the representatives of army and government establishment, who sound a less-than-harmonious 'jingle'. In her detailed note to 'gorsefierce' Roberts identifies that 'in the language of flowers gorse symbolises anger', embodying a kind of resistance by flowering bright yellow throughout the winter months. The same note claims Celtic linguistic origins for Latin terms designating types of the genus, and indicates the flower was used as a 'cognisance by the Plantagenet kings'.³⁷ This is a politicisation of the language of flowers, and the soldier's 'stand' signifies as a kind of symbolic reverse *coup d'état*, entering the 'the foreign field', which surely evokes Rupert Brooke's idealised piece of imperialistic England, with the same force with which Edward I once appropriated the lands surrounding Llanybri. Roberts is transforming the contingencies

of life into idealising art, scaling the epic and the heroic in ways that are alive to the complex politics of war and nationality. Later on, in a letter to Graves, Roberts returns to the flower:

Of the flowers in your poem – why broom? Could it not be gorse – of the same family and so very consistent to Wales even throughout her bardic poetry. It is too of the same family as Trefoil. Broom wasn't introduced into this country I believe until 1760?³⁸

Patrick McGuinness has rightly highlighted the disparity between the ending of the poem itself and Roberts's outline of the ending in the accompanying prose 'Argument'.³⁹ Clearly, this is no soldier 'meekly' walking into the mental home, as the argument suggests (*Collected Poems*, p. 64), although it is certain that the new dawn that awaits both lovers at the end is far from an unproblematic pastoral or bucolic return to new beginnings:

Salt spring from frosted sea filters palea light
Raising tangerine and hard line of rind on the
Astringent sky. (p. 69)

Nevertheless there is a sense of a newly acquired freedom, and not just a personal freedom, however modulated and complicated by the mythological echoes: 'he of deep love / Frees dragon from the glacier glade' (p. 69).

In November 1942 Rhys wrote to Graves announcing his discharge from the Army on grounds of poor physical health, and he was swift to return to more productive work, freeing the dragon by relaunching *Wales* in a typically forward-looking and combative style:

For the war has made the Welsh realise that they are a nation with a country, a people, a culture and a tradition *different* from England's to fight for. There is a new wave of national feeling about among our people. There is, in truth, a

Welsh renaissance.⁴⁰

There is a sense in which this is more manifesto than description, the public statement in positive propagandist terms of Rhys's earlier private concerns about the state of his homeland. Rhys was to be proactive in this aspiring renaissance, however, and he produced two more anthologies during this period: *More Poems from the Forces* (1943), and *Modern Welsh Poetry* (1944). By March 1944 Rhys was back in regular correspondence with Graves, and Graves was drawing on Rhys's expertise in Welsh literature and scholarship: 'Dear Robert, I think Lady Guest's chapter on Taliesin gives you what you want [...]. Have you been in touch with Dr H. I. Bell of the British Museum, or Professor Ifor Williams, Bangor N. Wales?'⁴¹ Graves was working on material towards *The White Goddess*, and Rhys was not only providing academic and textual leads, but also the medium in which Graves's project was to find its first public appearance: five of Graves's poems appeared in *Wales*, 3, no. 3, followed by the first part of 'Dog, Lapwing and Roebuck' in *Wales*, 3, no. 4 (Summer 1944). At this point it was still active work in progress, and engaged with its readership on those terms:

Bear patiently with me, poets of Wales, for last St. David's Day a drop of inspiration leaped out upon my finger as I was stirring the Cauldron of Caridwen, and I sucked it absent-mindedly. But since it was only one drop, not three, I need your help in unravelling certain closely woven secrets that still baffle me.⁴²

Graves continued the argument in the next issue: 'No, I am not confusing the two Taliesins',⁴³ and into *Wales*, 4, no. 6:

This argument is about the various types of Hercules in the ancient world, and leads up to an explanation of why the answer to the ingenious acrostic concealed in the 'Hanes Taliesin', a mediaeval Welsh poem attributed to Taliesin, is

a secret Irish bardic alphabet.⁴⁴

In December 1945, the double volume of *Wales* contains Graves's poems 'The Blodeuwedd of Gwion ap Gwreang', the poem in which Roberts felt he should have used 'gorse' instead of 'broom', and 'Câd Goddeu' ('The Battle of the Trees'), with the accompanying dedication 'Texts restored and rededicated to Angharad Rhys of Llanybri', in an issue that also explored 'The General Election, 1945', and 'Post-War Building in Wales', all different but related engagements with restoration, rebuilding and recovery.⁴⁵ The original plan was for Rhys's newly-established Druid Press to publish Graves's completed *The White Goddess*, but the idea foundered on continuing politics surrounding paper shortages and political control of the printers to which Rhys had access.

Throughout this period of intense activity Graves was also corresponding with Lynette Roberts, and she helped extensively with the detail of Graves's project. Graves famously credits her in a letter with getting the project started:

As for *The White Goddess*; you're largely responsible for my writing that book. It began with your sending me that inaccurate but discerning book of the Rev. E. Davies's; that gave me a start and I began checking up all round.⁴⁶

In 1944 Faber published Lynette Roberts's first collection, simply titled *Poems*, which she sent to Graves. His reaction returns us to the question of style once more. Whilst he was largely sympathetic and complimentary, his was far from unqualified praise. The 'greatest pleasure', he wrote, came from the 'home poems', such as 'Poem from Llanybri', and not 'Cwmcelyn' and its like, of which he says: 'you set yourself a task of great technical difficulty and conquer it like a daring young girl on a flying trapeze; but the result is not pleasure'.⁴⁷ He uses the adjective 'modernish' to damn another line (p. 83), which is reminiscent of an earlier letter in which he expresses doubts about

Roberts stating that she wanted to do some ‘experimental work’: ‘I wonder whether one *should* do experimental work: I mean, it denies the certainty necessary for the poetic act and puts too much emphasis on the technique. The theme should dictate the technique and only if the theme is thoroughly original is an original technique justified, I should say.’⁴⁸ The observation revisits the central thesis of, and suspicions within, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, and the move from early to later Modernism does not seem to have altered Graves’s mind a great deal in this respect. But this further admission suggests at least some understanding that there may be a point to a modernist idiom: ‘You are saying: “To interpret the present god-awful complex confusion one must unconfusedly use the language of god-awful complex confusion.”’⁴⁹ He does not at this point reflect upon himself, but in writing a book of the nature of *The White Goddess* he must occasionally have been conscious of his own language of god-awful complex confusion, and experimental originality of theme.

The poem ‘Cwmcelyn’, meaning ‘the valley of the holly’, is effectively an earlier manifestation of ‘Part V’ of Roberts’s longer poem *Gods with Stainless Ears*, originally included in her 1944 *Poems* to point towards new and experimental future directions. The lines from *Gods with Stainless Ears* quoted earlier are also part of ‘Cwmcelyn’, and thus representative of the poetry in which Graves could feel no pleasure. In reply, Roberts is steely in her defence of her modern idiom:

I cannot change it; but I believe a stricter technique would have reduced the poem and clarified what I wanted to say. On the other hand it would have been less pliable and adventurous and may have constrained that which I had purposely set out to do: which was to use words in relation to today – both with regard to sound (i.e.: discords ugly grating words) and meaning.⁵⁰

When, six years on, Roberts writes that *Gods with Stainless Ears*

has been finally published in its entirety by Faber, she tells Beryl and Robert Graves: 'You will *loathe* it.'⁵¹

Fran Brearton has argued for ways in which *The White Goddess* 'engages, if obliquely, with the politics of the 1940s, and thus, over its shoulder, with the politics of the Great War and inter-war period.'⁵² The explorations of Welsh mythology to Graves's own ends is not in this respect an evasion of contemporary mid- and post-war concerns, but a restatement by different and more complex means. In this Graves finds common ground with both Rhys and Roberts, whose poetry throughout this period is drawing on aspects of the Welsh mythology that underpins *The White Goddess* in order to mediate their everyday experiences during wartime and its aftermath. That theirs is a modernist idiom engaging with myth in different and more immediate ways than those of the 1922 generation of modernists perhaps allows Graves to put to one side, if not quite tolerate, the stylistic 'experimentalism' of their poetry. However, *The White Goddess* is also a remarkable text in its various array of impertinent connections, exactly the kinds of connections characteristic of much modernist writing and thinking. In this respect it is not surprising that Graves's poetics of myth develops in part through an intellectual and emotional exchange with two radical Anglo-Welsh modernists, themselves working with the currency of myth amidst the cruel modernities of war, and similarly concerned with investigating the significance of a shared past to an uncertain future.

I return, by way of conclusion, to the question which prompted so much speculation during the early stages of the war. Where are the war poets of Rhys's and Roberts's generation? Rhys's typically combative answer of 1941 is still the most useful: despite their stylistic impertinence, despite their writing the 'wrong kind' of war poetry, despite paper shortages and literary politics, and despite the best efforts of war itself, they are under our noses, and Graves and *The White Goddess* are there with them.

NOTES

¹ On 6 November 1941 the BBC Programme for the Forces carried a ten-minute broadcast with readings from the anthology, entitled 'Poems from the Forces'. The programme was repeated in February and March 1942. *Poems from the Forces* was published by Routledge in September 1941.

² Dylan Thomas, 'Prologue to an Adventure', *Wales*, 1 (Summer 1937), 1–6 (p. 1).

³ Keidrych Rhys, ed., 'Introduction', *Poems from the Forces* (London: Routledge, 1941), p. xiii.

⁴ Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, 1, no. 7 (July 1940), 532–35 (p. 533).

⁵ Kate McLoughlin, *Martha Gelhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 174. For further explorations of some of the issues surrounding the question 'Where are the War Poets?', see Vernon Scannell's 'Introduction: Setting the Scene', in his *Not Without Glory: Poets of the Second World War* (London: Woburn Press, 1976); H. M. Klein, 'Tambimuttu's *Poetry in Wartime*', in Ian Higgins, ed., *The Second World War in Literature: Eight Essays* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1986); and Linda Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1985), especially the chapter 'Where are the War Poets?'. For a detailed and incisive summary of this debate and the vagaries of Spender's and *Horizon*'s position, see Andrew Sinclair, *War Like a Wasp: The Lost Decade of the 'Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), especially the chapter 'Where are the War Writers?'.
⁶ Herbert Read, 'Pictures of the War', *Listener*, 599 (4 July 1940), 22.

⁷ Graves's intervention in the debate is now more widely known owing to its inclusion, with additional later comment, in *The Common Asphodel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949).

⁸ Stephen Spender, 'War Poetry in this War', *Listener*, 666 (16 October 1941), 539–40 (p. 539).

⁹ Robert Graves, 'War Poetry in this War', *Listener*, 667 (23 October 1941), 566–67 (p. 566).

¹⁰ Robert Graves, *The Common Asphodel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. 312.

¹¹ Helen Goethals, *The Unassuming Sky: The Life and Poetry of Timothy Corsellis* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), p. 177.

¹² Keidrych Rhys to Robert Graves, 18 September 1941. Rhys's correspondence to Graves is unpublished. This and subsequent quotations from the correspondence are reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford, and the Estate of Keidrych Rhys.

¹³ Keidrych Rhys, letter, *Listener*, 668 (30 October 1941), 603.

¹⁴ Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, 3, no. 13 (January 1941), 5–7 (p. 5).

¹⁵ Geoffrey Grigson, Herbert Palmer, Vernon Watkins, letters, *Listener*, 669 (6 November 1941), 635.

¹⁶ Stephen Spender, letter, *Listener*, 670 (13 November 1941), 667;

Keidrych Rhys, letter, *Listener*, 671 (20 November 1941), 699.

¹⁷ Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, 4, no. 24 (December 1941), 375–77 (p. 376).

¹⁸ Andrew Sinclair, *War Like a Wasp*, p. 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

²⁰ Robert Graves to Alun Lewis, 15 November 1941, *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 307.

²¹ The phrase is from the last line of C. Day Lewis, 'Where are the War Poets?', *Penguin New Writing*, 3, February 1941, p. 114.

²² John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 581–83.

²³ Gerwyn Williams, 'Occupying New Territory', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 343. The main subject of Williams's article is Alun Llywelyn-Williams, poet and founder of the journal *Tir Newydd*. Rhys translated one of Llywelyn-Williams's famous post-war poems as 'First Peace Christmas'. See Keidrych Rhys, *The Van Pool: Collected Poems*, ed. by Charles Mundye (Bridgend: Seren, 2012), p. 168.

²⁴ Keidrych Rhys, 'The Fire Sermon or Bureaucracy Burned', in *The Van Pool: Collected Poems*, p. 91.

²⁵ William Empson, 'Poem', *Wales*, 'Wartime Broadsheet', 1, [1940].

²⁶ Keidrych Rhys, editorial matter, *Wales*, 'Wartime Broadsheet'.

²⁷ Anon., 'The Listener's Book Chronicle', *Listener*, 683 (12 February 1942), 216–19 (p. 219).

²⁸ Advertising matter, *Listener*, 683 (12 February 1942), 217.

²⁹ Herbert Palmer, 'Poems of Peace and War', *English*, 4, no. 20, 1942, 63–65 (p. 63).

³⁰ E. M. Forster, radio broadcast transcript of April 1942, in *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster, 1929–1960*, ed. by Mary Lago, Linda K. Hughes, Elizabeth MacLeod Walls (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2008), p. 179. *Poems from the Forces* also received a favourable mention in the *Observer*: in a brief list of Christmas Books it is described as having 'vigour', in a column that also recommends Graves's *Proceed*, *Sergeant Lamb* ('Christmas Books: You Can't Go Wrong', *Observer*, 21 December 1941, p. 2). Spender did at least review Rhys's own subsequent collection of poems, *The Van Pool* (1942) with a degree of favour: 'As it is, the outstanding Routledge poet is Keidrych Rhys, who, with an extremely disordered imagination, does really feel strongly, and has vitality' ('Christmas among the Nightingales', *Observer*, 22 November 1942, p. 3).

³¹ Unpublished letter from Lynette Roberts to Robert Graves, 12 June 1942. Lynette Roberts's unpublished correspondence to Graves is reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford, and the Estate of Lynette Roberts. A significant proportion of the Roberts and Graves correspondence is published in *Poetry Wales*, 19, no. 2 (1983), and I quote from this published source where possible.

³² Alun Lewis to Gweno Lewis, 19 March 1942, *Letters to my Wife*, ed. by Gweno Lewis (Bridgend: Seren, 1989), p. 201.

³³ Rhys's correspondence to Glyn Jones is unpublished and held at the National Library of Wales.

³⁴ Keidrych Rhys, declaration, June 1942. Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford, and the Estate of Keidrych Rhys.

³⁵ Roberts to Graves, 12 June 1942.

³⁶ Lynette Roberts, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p. 69.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁸ Roberts to Graves, 7 August 1945.

³⁹ *Collected Poems*, p. xxxii.

⁴⁰ Keidrych Rhys, 'Editorial', *Wales*, 3, no. 1 (July 1943), 4–6 (p. 4).

⁴¹ Rhys to Graves, 13 March 1944.

⁴² Robert Graves, 'Dog, Lapwing and Roebuck', *Wales*, 3, no. 4 (Summer 1944), 34–51 (p. 34).

⁴³ Robert Graves, 'Dog, Lapwing and Roebuck', *Wales*, 4, no. 5 (Autumn 1944), 36–50 (p. 36).

⁴⁴ Robert Graves, 'Dog, Lapwing and Roebuck (3)', *Wales*, 4, no. 6 (Winter 1945), 57–67 (p. 57).

⁴⁵ Robert Graves, 'Two Poems', *Wales*, 5, no. 8–9 (December 1945), 22–25 (p. 22). The same issue contains Thomas Jones, 'The General Election, 1945', 8–16, and T. Alwyn Lloyd, 'Post-War Building in Wales', 17–21. Angharad Rhys is the daughter of Roberts and Rhys.

⁴⁶ Graves to Roberts, 26 April 1950, *Poetry Wales*, 19, no. 2 (1983), 51–124 (p. 111).

⁴⁷ Graves to Roberts, 3 December 1944, *Poetry Wales*, p. 82.

⁴⁸ Graves to Roberts, 5 October 1944, *Poetry Wales*, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Graves to Roberts, 3 December 1944, *Poetry Wales*, p. 82.

⁵⁰ Roberts to Graves, 18 December 1944, *Poetry Wales*, p. 84.

⁵¹ Roberts to Beryl and Robert Graves, 29 March 1951, *Poetry Wales*, p. 118.

⁵² Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 96.