ROBERT GRAVES

INTERVIEW WITH A DEAD MAN

AFTER A WHILE the dead man, recognizing my voice, began to whistle and imitate the masters of his old school, many of whom, bicentenarians, survived him. 'Though perhaps no longer, ahem, in the active pursuit of pedagogy,' he intoned in a mock-clerical voice.

'What's the news?' I asked.

'News?' he said. 'Well, for a start here's a letter that came last night from my executors informing me that I am expected to write a posthumous Anthem for the League of Nations suitable for translation into at least twenty-seven languages.'

He went on to say that he had indeed already executed the commission: early that morning he had written a marching song of hope, to rhythms heavily stressed for percussion purposes, and poked it up through the letter slit of the stout Welsh-quarried slabs of slate, inscribed 'he being dead yet liveth', which formed the roof of his quasi-eternal resting place. He had, however, recollected the nearness of the church, where the song would undoubtedly be sung at Christmas and Easter, on Empire Day, the King's Birthday, and all similar semi-religious, semi-political feasts; and had slowly pulled the composition back and torn it up before the sexton had caught a glint of it.

'It was an ironic production,' he said, 'but the living can never believe that the dead have a sense of humour, so whenever any reference had been made to the song in my hearing or whenever it was sung or whistled, I should have been forced to chuckle audibly to disprove this popular fallacy.'

'I am beautifully embalmed,' he continued. 'They were obliged, of course, to remove my digestive and sexual organs, which are corruptible, but I still have my fingers free to pick my nose in the old absent fashion, to scratch my head when it itches and to use a pencil thoughtfully when the itch is eased. This is a lidless coffin allowing me plenty of elbow room. My eyes are shut with coins, but that is no handicap in the decent darkness of the vault; even when alive, I always had the knack of writing with my eyes shut. I lay the left hand flat as a margin to the paper and, pricking the skin with my pencil each time, know by sensory indication just where to begin the new line.'

Thus he rattled on, remarking among other things that at least he had no more financial worries. He had benefited handsomely under his own will and paid the lease of the vault and of a small plot of land around it for ninety-nine years in advance.

Unfortunately the freehold, the property of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, was not for sale; he had, however, secured the option for renewal at the same terms when the ninety-nine years should have expired. He asked for news of his wife and children and of their step-father.

In short, he was perfectly dead, and his daily postbag, because of the recency of his death, was enormous; he used the blank pages of letters and the back of envelopes for his replies. He was in no position to buy stationery, even if his signature to cheques or letters had been valid, which it was not. However, he calculated that the serviceability of his large gold propelling-pencil (which held, screwed in its base, a copious supply of refills) could even at the present extravagant rate of daily use be prolonged for fully another three hundred years.

'With care, for as long as three thousand years,' he cried, 'and by that time who will care for my work except antiquarians?'

His mood was now so hilarious that I had no compunction in leaving him without another word of commiseration or encouragement. His parting joke was one about the legal impossibility of the dead libelling the living.

'But,' he said, 'I am careful not to trade on my immunity. I flatter myself that I died a sportsman and lie buried as such.'