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ROBERT GRAVES

LIFE OF THE POET GNAEUS ROBERTULUS GRAVESA

THOUGH SOME DETRACTORS are found who affirm that Gnaeus Robert ulus Gravesa was born of mean stock, his father being a servile Irish pedlar of mussel-fish, and his mother a Teutonic freedwoman, daughter of an ambulant apothecary, yet his descendants, on the contrary, claim that the Gravesae were an ancient equestrian clan of Gallic origin and that the poet's paternal grandfather was both High Priest of Hibernian Limericum and a man very learned in the mathematic sciences.

This difference of opinion may be left unsettled. In any event, Gnaeus Robertulus Gravesa, whether of ancient stock or of parents and forefathers in whom he could take no just pride, was born in a suburban villa at the tenth milestone from Londinium, when L. Salisburius was sole Consul, in the year following the death of A. Tennisonianus Laureatus, whom the deified Victoria raised to patrician rank. It is handed down that the infant, being the eighth child of his father, did not cry at his birth, but wore only a beast-like scowl, which already gave assurance of a determination to overcome the cruel pricks of fate by a mute and cynical habit of mind. There was added another omen: a cauliflower plant growing in his father's garden began to sprout with unnatural and unwonted shoots, namely with such alien potherbs as leeks, onions, mallows, parsnips, marjoram, turnips and even samphire of the cliff, thus portending the excessive variety of the studies to which he would devote his stylus, and which subsequently earned him the title of Polyhistor. But on the crown of the cauliflower burgeoned Apollo's laurel.

He studied grammar and rhetoric at a school maintained by the Carthusian Guild, but interrupted them to march in the war against Gulielmus the German, being appointed centurion in the XXIII Legion. It is related that when, riddled with wounds at the battle of the Corvine Wood, his supine body was set aside by his comrades for cremation on the common pyre, lo! the god Mercury, distinguished by winged sandals and caduceus as well as by conspicuously divine grace, appeared to the military Tribune who was lamenting this premature death, and spoke as follows: 'Man: there remain yet the seeds of life in that gory and mutilated frame. Do not anger the gods by conveying to the flames that which they have themselves spared! My Robertulus, recovering his spent forces, will yet lead a life profitable to the Legion on account of his shining sword, and pleasing to his fatherland because of his well-tuned lyre and replete tablets.' So saying, the Herald of the Gods vanished, and the Tribune did not despise this message, for after binding up the wounds which had ceased to bleed, he wrapped his own military cloak about the seeming corpse, whereupon a she-weasel (or a witch in weasel's disguise) appeared on the right hand and blew life with her own mouth into those motionless nostrils.

He was above the usual stature and not over-fat, with curly hair ill-combed, a crooked nose broken in youth while he contended in the gymnasium, and the same physical disproportion noted by the divine Homer in Ulysses, namely that his legs were too short for his body. His skin was exceedingly white and did not vary its colour even in the hottest suns of Egypt and Spain; but, at the most, freckled only moderately, so that if ever two freckles joined together in one, he would exclaim: 'This is the nearest that you let me approach, O Phoebus, to a manly bronze.' He often suffered from affections of the stomach and lungs, but nursed no jealousy against the gods on this score, and is recorded to have said that, since his parents had left him a rich legacy of health, he alone must bear the blame if he frittered away this gift by insalubrious practices.

Upon being presented with the wooden foil and hanging up his arms and helmet in the temple of Mars, he resumed his rhetorical studies, inserting himself among the Oxonians, but determined thereafter to be beholden to no man as his patron but always remain to his own self a master; and this resolution, confirmed with an oath to Infernal Hecate, he obstinately maintained throughout his life.

In the fatal year that saw the universal ruin both of the moneylenders and of the grain merchants, an event which sowed widespread poverty in every part of the world, he went into voluntary banishment, choosing the Greater Balearic Island for his retreat. Some say that he departed in haste and a dark cloak to avoid the lictors, being accused of the capital crime of murder, and that he left word with his freedmen to forward his household goods by ship secretly, lest they be seized; certain it is that for the space of the next six years he kept himself close in the Balearic villa which he had built for himself, not even crossing over to the Hispanic mainland, and practising it is not known what strange and secret rites.

He married twice, each wife being a Briton of generous birth, and had four children by the first marriage and an equal number by the second. With several vernacular languages grown familiar, besides his own and the pure Latin and Greek tongues, he spoke all with greater fluency than accuracy or elegance. His vices were few, apart from an immoderate greed. He himself confesses, in a letter, to a peculiar relish for coarse bread rubbed with garlic and dipped in olive oil; and for the sausage of raw and greasy pork for which the island of his choice is notorious. To this failing must, however, be added a severe pride and a certain disregard not only of his personal appearance but -- except in formal company -- of befitting table manners. His eldest daughter, though she loved and honoured him, often complained in public that he would at times wear two socci of different colour, one on the left foot and one on the right; and that his hair was at times smeared with honey and sprinkled with dead leaves. Moreover, one of his ex-slaves has reported how once, lifting the cover from a particularly succulent dish of mushrooms at a birthday banquet, Gravesa asked eagerly: 'Are all of these for me?' His pride showed itself nowhere to worse advantage than in his refusal to do what all his more experienced friends implored, viz. to write

the same book often, changing merely the names and the scenes, since the crowd loves to be reminded of what it has once enjoyed and to which it has become accustomed. Indeed, when they voiced this plea with tears and torn white locks, he, being set upon a continuous change of theme, petulantly inquired: 'Sirs, would you have me grow rich by inventing a formula for limning comical rabbits?' This he confirmed with the following sharp improvisation, magisterially declaring that the awkward scansion of 'rabbits' (cu˘nicu˘li) should not deny them the glory of entering his hexameters.

Pintori species comicorum cuniculorum Laetius occurrens mores mercede subegit, Heu! tragica at persona tegit nunc ora jocosi Insidiis capti comicorum cuniculorum.

At other times he composed both prose and verse with difficulty and many cancellations, so that often nothing was left to Felix, his friend and transcriber, but two or three scrawled words in the margin of the wax-tablets, these also being destined to cancellation before the work should be done.

It is said that, while Vinstonius the Dictator took his ease after the downfall of Hitlerus, this same Gravesa (to whom he had shown many distinguished marks of favour) read out to him from his poetical works for twelve days in succession, from breakfast-time until the supper-hour, seated on a bench in a retiring room of the Senate House; the Consul Atlaeus taking a turn at the reading whenever the poet was interrupted by a certain weariness of his voice. But though, truly, Gravesa visited Londinium about this time, the story is hardly to be credited. For Vinstonius did not relax his taut mind even for a day after this great victory, being intent rather on restraining the victorious onset of his Scythian allies. Moreover, though Gravesa's verses are now praised by many urbane critics and learned grammarians for their tart flavour and curious quality, he himself always read in a hoarse voice, undramatically and with a glazed expression of the features, pouring forth the Muse in a flat and toneless mumble. Nor was Atlaeus's delivery of verse, if we may trust our authorities, so sweet and effective as to charm the grim soul of his powerful colleague.

The death of Gravesa was portended by evident signs. The house in which he was born collapsed suddenly because of dry rot creeping in upon the beams; furthermore an eel of prodigious size, lifting its head from the neighbouring lake called The Mere of Rushes, cried: 'Lament, Londiniensians, for the twilight of poesy is upon you.' A thunderbolt also struck the Athenaeum where his father and uncle had aforetime been priests (but he himself never enjoyed this honour); and a fire spontaneously sprang up and burned five hundred shelves of books in the Britannic Museum, though not a single one of his own works suffered so much as a light singeing.

The marvellous manner of his apotheosis is common knowledge. As he sat one evening beneath his Balearic mulberry-tree, about the Kalends of May, conversing with friends and grandchildren who constantly felicitated him upon the active intelligence

remaining to his mind, despite a decrepit body, on a sudden (strange to repeat) a woman of effulgent form and more than human vivacity appeared, cleaving the air with a car drawn by dragons, though some say by doves. This Goddess reined in her docile team and hovered near by at a height of some six cubits from the ground, therefrom offering the poet such customary allurements as a vitreous castle, apple orchards, and a vat of mead watched over by lovely virgins. Gravesa being beckoned to climb up and sit beside her, his companions averted their eyes from this unlawful sight; but presently, when they dared to look again, he had vanished without farewell, even as Romulus vanished from the company of the shepherds, his trusty associates, in the very middle of Rome. Thus it was said: 'Once it seemed Gravesa died, yet he returned from the dead; again, it seemed Gravesa did not die, yet he departed.'

Nevertheless, Ganymedus Turpis, a low comedian, has introduced a scene into his mime 'The Poetasters', portraying Gravesa as being hacked to death by enraged Palmesanian fishwives, in consequence of a bitter haggle about the market price of lampreys.

Explicit Vita Gn. Rob. Gravesae.