

Robert Graves: A Personal Memoir

My brief association with Robert Graves about twenty five years ago, an association that lasted from June 1966 till February 1968, consisted of six letters, one cable, and a visit to Deya, Mallorca, where Graves had been living for many years.

It all began after I had completed my M.A. dissertation on his poetry and then, on the spur of the moment and greatly daring, sent him a copy, despite warnings that one did not do this kind of thing. Of course, there was an accompanying letter. I was fully prepared to accept that Graves would not respond; I even imagined him throwing my dissertation into the Mediterranean--something I myself felt like doing at the time, except that the Apies River or the Vaaldam would have had to suffice. About ten weeks later the following letter arrived (and his having replied at all was enough to keep me swollen-headed forever):

Dear Betty de Wet

Thank you: it took over two months to arrive. "Lydian:" refers to the Lydian musical note which the Greeks condemned as effeminate as opposed to the Doric, but is the ordinary C major scale.

"Dawn B." No longing for death: error. Defiance of death always. The visiting angel promising LIFE after the destruction of the prison. Angel, not hell.

"Death by Drums." "Death" is used as in the song "Come die, my Augustus, for I will die too" but not so specifically sexual. It is to subject myself to ecstasy without care of the consequences.

[In margin] About the war: you must realize that we were all self-poisoned by our adrenalin glands stimulated by noise and danger.

"The Last Day of Leave" was written during the 2nd World War: I have suppressed it because it telescoped two experiences.

"Down Wanton Down" is a quotation from King Lear: the fool refers to the Cockney wife beating the eels on the head when they try to escape from the eel pie.

"The Persian Version," by the way, is historically accurate, historians now confess.

"Haunted House:" a reminiscence of Limerick, etc. etc., I won't weary you by more.

You get a long way, but of course you are hampered critically by not knowing the women to whom the poems are addressed: two wives and four others of different nationalities and natures each of whom has lent me a different magic.

The qualities of the poems reflect these women's temperaments. My most recent poems are not yet published, except in

unobtainable limited edition; a few of them are so far ahead of the earlier ones that really you should have the patience to statement.

Cohen and Day and Martin S. Smith got things all screwed up [Graves refers here to J.M. Cohen (Robert Graves, Oliver & Boyd, London, 1960), Douglas Day (Swifter than Reason, OUP, London, 1963) and Martin Seymour-Smith (Robert Graves, Longman, Green & Co., London, 1956)]. I don't mind so long as the poems themselves are available.

By the way, "sailcloth felt as satin" is what happens under such hallucinogenic drugs as psilocybin.

Thank you for being a friend. I find to my embarrassment that the Oxford English Dictionary contains no quotation of the sort of Moon-relation between man and woman that I have made a commonplace. Did I invent it? It looks like it. I blush.

Yours sincerely

Robert Graves

[On the back of the envelope he had scribbled] "On the whole, I should add, you are accurate and perceptive"

The "error" he refers to in his comment on "Dawn B." (his poem "Dawn Bombardment") in the fourth line of his letter was my statement that, in this particular poem, it seemed to me that an escape from war was so fervently desired that even death seemed welcome. I quote the poem in full:

Guns from the sea open against us:
The smoke rocks bodily in the casement
And a yell of doom goes up.
We count and bless each new, heavy concussion--
Captives awaiting rescue.

Visiting angel of the wild-fire hair
Who in dream reassured us nightly
Where we lay fettered,
Laugh at us, as we wake--our faces
So tense with hope the tears run down.

My statement, in my dissertation, was clearly a gross misreading, caused most probably by my having been so enthusiastically committed that I did not see the wood for trees. When Graves says "captives" in this poem, he means just that: prisoners of war, not "captives" of the war itself. The "guns" that open against them are not enemy guns, as I seemed to have read it, but their own guns attacking the enemy, thus likely to free them. The clue lies in common sense, not in fanciful inversions.

Graves' reference to "Lydian" in the first line of his letter comes from his poem "Death by Drums," to which he refers in the eighth line of his letter. This poem is far from easy and mere common sense alone is not likely to yield many answers. In the light of what Graves says about it, it would seem that he regards this poem as a love poem first and foremost, and that the references to "drums" and "suicide" function mainly to accentuate different kinds of love.

Here is the poem:

If I cried out in anger against music,
It was not that I cried
Against the wholesome bitter arsenic
Necessary for suicide:
For suicide in the drums' racking riot
Where horned moriscos wailing to their bride
Scare every Lydian songster from the spot.

In the light of Graves' remarks it would appear, then, that the Lydian songsters represent the ordinary (they sing in the "ordinary C major scale") as opposed to the "horned moriscos wailing to their bride" who, logically, then represent the extraordinary that "scares" the songsters away. Thus the "death" of the title and the "suicide" referred to in the poem itself both assume symbolic status: a surrender of identity to the "wholesome bitter arsenic" of a different kind of experience: the self is subdued, possibly.

Graves' poem "The Persian Version" is, of course, one of his better-known ones, in which the Persians see the battle of Marathon as a mere trivial skirmish: they treat with contempt the Greek claim that it was a major victory, or an "ill-starred attempt /To conquer Greece." It is a clever satire on the political point of view. Certainly, historians have not yet corrected the entries on this battle in their reference books!

Graves' remark about his poem "The Haunted House" reminds one of his account in Goodbye To All That of his stay in Limerick, which coincided with the birth of his daughter Jenny. He was then with the Royal Welch Third Battalion. Limerick, he says, "looked like a war-ravaged town. The main streets were pitted with holes like shell-craters and many of the bigger houses seemed on the point of collapse...nobody built new houses at Limerick now..." [Goodbye to All That, Penguin, Harmondsworth, pp. 228-29. Graves also talks here about the "shocks of the previous months" and about his wife's difficult time: "it took her years to recover..."]. This was in 1919, just after the Great War. Whether this was the reminiscence he refers to in his letter one does not, of course, know with any certainty, but it does add something to one's understanding of the poem:

"Come, surly fellow, come: a song!"
What, fools? Sing to you?
Choose from the clouded tales of wrong
And terror I bring to you:

Of a night so torn with cries,
Honest men sleeping
Start awake with rabid eyes,
Bone-chilled, flesh creeping,

Of spirits in the web-hung room
Up above the stable,
Groans, knocking in the gloom,
The dancing table,

Of demons in the dry well
That cheep and mutter,

Clanging of an unseen bell,
Blood choking the gutter,

Of lust frightful, past belief,
Lurking unforgotten,
Unrestrainable endless grief
In breasts long rotten.

A song? What laughter or what song
Can this house remember?
Do flowers and butterflies belong
To a blind December?

But even without Graves' very brief comment, which prompted me to look up the section in Goodbye To All That, the poem has a haunting quality that suggests a telescoping of experiences: despite the bitterness there is a tone of sadness, captured in the last two lines, that tempers the cynicism.

Of course, Graves is right in saying in the next paragraph of his letter that one is hampered by not knowing the women his love poems were addressed to. Nevertheless, the poems stand on their own and I think Graves himself would probably prefer to have it that way. The statement that each of the women in his life lent him a "different magic" is entirely in keeping with the magic that underlies all of his love poems.

Needless to say, I blush every time I re-read his remark about my lack of patience, but let me add in my own defence that I did, in my dissertation, make it clear that I was dealing with poems then published, and that I had only some conclusions to offer. However, Graves was entirely right about my lack of patience in general: it is my besetting sin.

I also blush about my misreadings of some of his poems, but feel better when Graves talks about respectable critics like Cohen, Day, and Seymour-Smith having got things "screwed up." Luckily, as Graves says, it does not really matter: the poems themselves are available.

Graves' remark about hallucinogenic drugs prompted me to re-read the poem in question, entitled "A Measure of Casualness." It remains one of the most moving love poems in English:

Too fierce the candlelight; your gentle voice
Roars as in dream; my shoulder-nooks flower;
A scent of honeysuckle invades the house,
And my finger-tips are so love-enhanced
That sailcloth feels like satin to them.
Teach me a measure of casualness
Though you stalk into my room like Venus naked.

What Graves says about the drug psilocybin may explain the phrase "my shoulder-nooks flower," but the poem is so sensitive as a whole that it does not require knowledge of the effects of a drug to add to its statement. The poem speaks of a love that transforms everything; psilocybin is incidental, or "by the way," as Graves himself says.

After having received this first letter, which took me a while to decipher since it was written on thin paper, in red ink, and on both sides, I waited for about a month (curbing my impatience) before I

replied to thank him. I assumed that this would be the end of the matter. Then, in December, the second letter, dated 13 December 1966, arrived:

Dear Betty de Wet

Just back from a gallbladder operation in England followed by a lecture tour in the States: feeling fine, thanks! "Dawn Bombardment" was figurative--written in 1938. It referred to the prison in which so many of us live, not merely politically and socially, but the prison formed by routine habits of life.

The earliest riddle I heard was as a child in 1900. "Why does Kruger wear thick boots?" Ans. "To keep de Wet off de feet."

No: scientific discussions of poetic love, or even anthropological ones, don't really enlighten the reader--he or she has to have experienced it. I have written a good many poems secretly: forced on me by events.

Thank you and good luck!

Robert Graves

Again, I waited a while before replying, not wanting to create the impression that I wanted to start a regular correspondence. By the time I did write again, an overseas tour was on the cards, so I took the opportunity of asking him whether I could come and see him at Mallorca in the December of that year (1967). The following note, dated 4 April 1967, arrived some time later:

Dear Betty de Wet

I may be lecturing in Australia in early December; so please write to me again in October to tell me whether you are coming and I'll see if I can get back in time.

Yours very sincerely

Robert Graves

It was only after I had actually met him that I was told by several people that he was notoriously unwilling to grant interviews, and had no qualms about being rude to people who asked for interviews. I must have been the proverbial fool who rushed in....

On 26 April I wrote him the following letter, which I have in my possession because he returned it to me with his reply scribbled at the top:

Dear Mr Graves

Thank you for your letter. Travel agents have their own peculiar logic. To fly in "one direction" means to them Madrid-London-Frankfurt-Rome (Flying Crooked?) [The reference in parentheses is to his poem entitled "Flying Crooked"]. If you are now likely to be away in early December I could arrange now to start our tour in Rome and fly in the "other" direction, which means that we will arrive in Madrid shortly before our return to SA. Would the 13th or 14th suit you? I apologize for involving you in correspondence once again, but would not like to miss an opportunity of meeting you, and bookings have to be made in advance.

Sincerely

Betty de Wet

What he had scribbled at the top, dated 3 May, was the following:

In great haste. I'll be in Australia Oct 15 till early December. Back for Christmas and then expect to visit Russia in February. So write me at Christmas with your address in case things get changed. Forgive scrawl!

Yours

Robert Graves

I must have written to him again between May and November of that year, because in late November I received the following note, dated 16 November:

Dear Betty de Wet

So far as I know I shall be here all January, at least I have made no plans to go elsewhere. So tell me when you get to Paris whether you'll be coming along and I'll tell you if I have to be away for any reason not known now.

Yours

Robert Graves

I sent him a cable from Paris to confirm arrangements, and received the following reply:

Fine will be here Graves

When I arrived, Mrs. Graves received me most graciously and asked me not to stay for too long, since her husband was in bed with 'flu and she did not want him to be exhausted. She ushered me upstairs to his bedroom, and I found myself face to face with Robert Graves.

We spoke about South Africa--inevitably--about my job, about his recent translation of the Rubaiyyat in collaboration with Omar Ali-Shah (of which he gave me a copy, inscribed "Affectionately, Robert") and he read me a poem he was then composing ("Semi-Detached"). He said that he had liked me from my letters (a remark that still pleases me!) and then, after about thirty minutes, I got up dutifully and suggested that I leave so as not to tire him. His reply was: "Nonsense. Sit down. Nothing tires me." So, I stayed for another hour, chatting about his poems, about the White Goddess, and about Africa. He wanted to know more about the Black people of Africa and South Africa, but it was not the political situation that interested him, it was their customs, beliefs, and general outlook on life. Naturally, since I am not an expert in these matters, I could only tell him what I knew. He seemed disappointed when I told him that most of the Black people I knew came from patriarchal societies. All patriarchal societies, he believed were "wrong:" this was what was wrong with Christianity too. This led to a discussion of the White Goddess, in general terms, not, that is that he added anything that is not dealt with in his book on the subject. What fascinated me was the way he talked about what is nowadays referred to as "Mr. Graves' White Goddess" in an entirely matter-of-fact way: she was, simply, the "infinitely variable theme" of his poetry, of his life.

I had not taken a camera with me, neither had I taken a tape-recorder. The thought had simply never even occurred to me: it was not that kind of visit. It was enough for me that he had been willing to meet me.

My impressions of Robert Graves, the man? How can I presume to assess him? I can only say that the hour-and-a-half I spent there seemed very short. I did not feel that I was in the company of a stranger; there were no awkward pauses, no artificial attempts to make conversation. He did most of the talking, naturally. Robert Graves the poet was the same person as Robert Graves the man: the voice was entirely consistent throughout.

Graves himself says, in his book entitled The Crowning Privilege:

Who has ever successfully disguised his character in what he wrote?...I have never been able to understand the contention that a poet's life is irrelevant to his work--unless this means merely...that...membership of a reputable club, or an orthodox love-life, are not a sine qua non of literary eminence. If it means that a poet may be heartless or insincere or grasping in his personal relations and yet write true poems, I disagree wholeheartedly. (33)

I wrote to Robert Graves again in January 1968, thanking him for having allowed me to visit him, and received the following letter, dated February 1968:

Dear Betty

Thanks a lot for the Mebos recipe. I'll use our new greenhouse for the drying. My deep respects to your Aunt. Yes, there's not a single light-hearted joke in the whole Bible, only a few nasty jeers, and none in the hymns or liturgy. Mohammed at least made them, however wrily.

Were you here while I was writing "Semi-Detached?" I'll send it to you when it's printed somewhere--have no copy. It was lovely meeting you too.

Yours

Robert Graves

I replied to this letter, but did not follow up my request for a copy of "Semi-Detached." I did not want to be regarded as a nuisance. I also sent him a card on his birthday, and a Christmas card, but I did not hear from him again. I did not feel I could persist: after all, he had given me more of his time and attention than I had ever expected.

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