

Robert Graves and Edith Sitwell: A Shortened Poetic Relationship

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In *Poems 1914-26*, Robert Graves included "The College Debate", an ironic commentary on poetry criticism, inspired by Edith Sitwell (14-26, 159). In 1925, he dedicated his *Contemporary Techniques in Poetry* to her, in friendship (Seymour-Smith, 101). It could be argued that several of Graves's early works, such as "Philatelist Royal" bear striking similarities, in both tone and imagery, to pieces by Sitwell. Yet, their intimacy was over by 1926, becoming little more than a footnote in biographies and critical works on both poets. This is a pity, as comparisons between early works by the two appear to be worth study. In "The College Debate" (c.1923-25), Graves, using the Oxford Debating Society as his instrument, deplores the critical practice of weighing one poet against another, while admitting himself guilty of it. During the poem's course he speaks of defending "that fantastic" Edith Sitwell against critics, whilst being aware of the dangers of weighing poetic talent, instead of recognising the type of poetry which "sorts" with himself (157). By turns, the poem's tone is mocking, playful, and affectionate; the voice of a friend unafraid of offending. Sitwell, someone notoriously easy to upset, is referred to throughout as "Edith".

Yet, by the time Graves was writing such essays as "The Future of Poetry" (1926) and "Modernist Poetry and Civilisation" (1926, co-written with Laura Riding), Sitwell had become "Miss Sitwell" and her poetry dismissed (*Common Asphodel*, 58, 131, 161-162). Work playfully admired in "The College Debate" has, in "Modernist Poetry and Civilisation" become regarded as a "spiteful championship" of Victorianism (162). This increasing change of heart appears to have been influenced, in-part, by Riding. According to Martin Seymour-Smith, Graves cited Sitwell as being a friend throughout the early 1920s, the friendship dying c.1926, when Sitwell quarrelled with him due to his "defiance of poetic conventions", an odd thing for her to object to! (Seymour-Smith, 100-101) Graves's biographer indicates that the deeper cause of the rift may have been the poet's increasing involvement with Riding and his eventual split with Nancy Nicholson, of whom Sitwell was fond. Certainly, Graves's initial impression of Sitwell as a remarkable individual, whose reserve distanced her from the wild experimentation of her poems, appears to have collapsed by 1926, the year he met Riding. This was also the

year when he sold his copy of *The Sleeping Beauty*, which Sitwell autographed to himself and Nancy.

As noted by Seymour-Smith, Sitwell re-purchased the copy, selling it once more with the added comment:

I wrote this dedication at a time when Robert Graves was still a tentative English nightengale (sic) and not an American loon or screech-owl. Though poor, I am happy to buy this book (from the shop to which he sold it) for the sum of fifteen shillings, so that no one can accuse me of being a hoot-fan. (138)

Does the allusion of an "American loon", refer to Riding's influence over Graves? If so, then the screech-owl could be interpreted as a pun on the title of Graves's previous journal *The Owl* (edited 1919), which was revived as *The Winter Owl* in 1923 (98). *The Owl*, funded and illustrated as it was by Nancy Nicholson's father, William, might have been regarded by Sitwell as embodying Graves's gentler "Georgian" persona and his commitment to the Nicholson family. By turning the bird into its more gothic incarnation, the screech-owl, Sitwell may have been registering her distaste at what she regarded as Graves's abandonment of both his early style and connections. According to Victoria Glendinning, the friendship ended "through no desire of Graves's" and was never truly over as, via visitors, Sitwell was kept up to date with news on Graves in Majorca (57). It is significant that, although Sitwell was undoubtedly waspish concerning the older Graves, she did not totally reject him. For, although Sitwell excommunicated many of those with whom she feuded, she remained interested in Robert Graves and his work. It is perhaps, therefore, unfortunate that it is Sitwell's later chagrin concerning Graves which is remembered, to the detriment of links between work by the two poets.

Yet, such poetic connections exist and are significant. When researching a book on Edith Sitwell, I became increasingly aware of how the tone of her poetry differed from that evident in works by other modernists such as Eliot, Pound, and H.D. Indeed, the only writer to whom I kept returning by comparison, was the early Graves. What the two poets appeared to share was a sense of how images from childhood texts (such as nonsense poetry) came to shape interpretations of adult experience, and a poetic knowledge of how these familiar images could be transformed into poetry which recounted adult experience using elements from childhood genres. In other

words, knowledge of how personal histories, such as experiences of the 1914-18 war, could be described via folkloric narrative.

It appears significant that, in later life, both Graves and Sitwell sought to create muse-figures: in his case, the White Goddess and her Goddess rivals; in Sitwell's, the muse symbol of the self as sibyl, the iconography of which she nurtured using the talents of visual artists such as Howard Coster, Cecil Beaton, and Pavel Tchelitchew. Sitwell's self-muse enables her to be instantaneously creator and inspiration (a fate unlike that of Graves's post-Riding muse women) yet the sibylline figure that she becomes is (as with Graves's goddess) a personal creation of blended mythologies. Also, both Graves and Sitwell create early poetic landscapes which fuse elements from folklore and mythology, and which make use of ancestral stories (in Graves's case from his father's knowledge of fairy-lore, in Sitwell's from tales of ghosts and gallants reputedly haunting her family's homes at Renishaw, Derbyshire, and Wood-End, Scarborough). These landscapes, likewise, take much from the rhythms and sounds of nursery rhymes, and echo elements of Celtic and English ballad traditions. It is also worth noting that both poets, from opposite perspectives and widely differing personal experiences, write of having "come through" the First World War.

Often, in Graves's early poetry, narrative voices occupy the fairy-forest (both his own and his father's territory), whereas Sitwell's speakers encompass both this forest and the ordered, ornate pleasure-gardens of the Restoration and the Eighteenth-century. Just as Sitwell peoples these (literally) ravishing landscapes with nymphs, satyrs and outrageously dressed fairies, rakes and roués, so Graves's early poems are full of references to monsters, trolls, satyrs, weird sea-creatures, and nursery rhyme figures. Nonsense poetry, from the joyously anarchic world of Lewis Carroll, to the lonely lyricism of Edward Lear, can be regarded as influencing both writers. Indeed, Lear's use of the haunting refrain, odd courtships, and fantastic costumes could be regarded as being used, to different ends, by both Sitwell and Graves.

Despite those differences in domestic life which distinguish the two (unlike Graves, Sitwell never married or became a parent), both poets create mythic landscapes through which to explore life's extremities; from Graves's caves and the monstrous mediaeval terrain of "Saint", to Sitwell's equally hellish urban "commedia" landscapes in "Singerie" (1926-30, 4-6; *Wooden Pegasus*, 13-14). Likewise, explosive relationships condition how both poets later came to depict relations

between men and women, Graves being influenced by his relationship with Riding, Sitwell by her destructive, often one-sided, affair with the homosexual painter Pavel Tchelitchew. Yet, the most striking connections between work by the two poets can be recognised early in their careers, and centres on their respective uses of imagery from folk-mythology and nursery rhymes. It is to be regretted that, in most later volumes, Graves omits many of these early pieces which demonstrate how this use of the familiar nursery verse or tale, works.

In "The Ballad of Nursery Rhyme" (c.1919), for example, Graves celebrates the genre, revealing the depth of his feeling for it (14-26, 3-4). Whilst, in "The Poet in the Nursery", he appears to delight in the freedoms and subversions allowed by nursery rhymes (*Georgian Poetry*, 81-3). Likewise, in poems such as "The King of China's Daughter" (1920) and "Aubade" (1923), where a kitchen comes to life, as if it is a sequence of events on a nursery-frieze, Sitwell also revels in the absurdity allowed by nursery genres (*Wooden Pegasus*, 56-7; *Bucolic Comedies*, 14). What both poets are fascinated by is the controlled anarchy of the nursery rhyme, and the striking, subversive images which are allowed by the form. In "The Poet in the Nursery", Graves describes, with wonderful clarity, how the language of nursery rhyme both confounds the desire for logic whilst delighting the senses, thus transforming language and translating the experience of reading (and, therefore, knowledge) into something which proves to be both familiar and unknowable: "while round the nursery for long months there floated/wonderful words no one could understand" (1914-20, 4). In this poem, Graves places himself at the heart of a transformation, giving the image of translation both a literary and an emotional significance.

This placing of the self at centre-stage, is also undertaken by Sitwell in the more lugubrious piece, "Small Talk" (1920). Here, the poet imagines herself at the centre of a ghastly market-economy, where she is a latter-day Cassandra, fated to always tell the truth and destined to be ignored. Outside, a harpy sells its own eggs, "no trace of life", to farmer's wives, whilst Sitwell herself, angry and "white as chalk", confronts an image of dead Cassandra (*Wooden Pegasus*, 68). Just as, in "The Poet in the Nursery", Graves describes words floating around the nursery-room like balls of light, so here Sitwell defines herself as being surrounded by figures who come from both classical and folk genres but are all, in some way, connected to tales told in the nursery.

What unites works such as these is the sense of transformation imparted by them, a kind of literary shape-shifting which haunts

them. These transmutations are made possible by the poetic homage paid to nursery fictions which have the power to occasion both wonder and terror. In Sitwell's poem "Singerie" and in "Saint" by Graves, both poets convey a sense of the terror of the nursery narrative. Graves achieves this end by transforming the familiar, Pre-Raphaelite knight-errant figure into a symbol of enduring shame, his heroism becoming almost criminal (1926-30, 4-6). In Sitwell's piece, she reworks rhythms and images from Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862), creating a horrific picture of a "summer afternoon in hell" complete with Rossetti's parrot-faced goblins (*Wooden Pegasus*, 13). The individual hells described by both poets, appear to be linked to images from the 1914-18 war. For example, Graves's Saint George figure recalls many images of the knight which were used as propaganda pieces, and deployed during the war's early years; finding their way onto stained glass memorials to fallen public-school boys, postcards, song-sheets, and also into plays. Likewise, Sitwell's sinister street, with its pulling down of blinds, recalls images used in war poetry by writers such as Owen and Sassoon. What both "Saint" and "Singerie" have in common, is a sense that behind public celebration there lurks the spectre of endless loss, a loss also embodied in the war poetry of Charlotte Mew.

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that, as a piece by John Freeman in *The Bookman* (1923) indicates, comparisons between the two poets were being noted early in their respective careers (Freeman, 163-4). Such comparisons, however, appear not to have been revived. As I have indicated, this is a pity, as Sitwell and Graves often share similarities of source, theme, narrative voice, and landscape. What they also have in common is a sense of poetic texture, which Sitwell acknowledged to be Gravesian (Glendinning, 57). Sitwell admired Graves's technical virtuosity, and his knowledge of poetic form, whereas what he responded to in her work was the wild inventiveness of her abstractism. Poems such as "Saint", "The Philatelist Royal", and "The Poet in the Nursery" come very close to being Sitwellian, whereas works by Sitwell like "The Satyr in the Periwig", "Three Poor Witches" and, later, "The Little Ghost Who Died for Love" seem to possess a Gravesian sense of texture. It is worth noting here that both poets often return to images of ghosts, hauntings, haunted houses and unquiet burials. Indeed, such images were to last beyond Georgianism in Graves's work, and were to constantly inspire Sitwell. As with Sitwell's ghost who died for love, a woman hanged in the

stead of her errant lover, Graves's ghosts are often those whose emotions are too intense to die, whether these be feelings of love, anguish, or betrayal. Also, Sitwell's ghost, Deborah Churchill, was an actual historical figure, as are many of Graves's witches and saints. Hauntings contained in poems by both writers, are as memorable as those within Thomas Hardy's ghost-ridden Wessex landscape. It is, therefore, not surprising that many poems by the two contain images of a past which appears to be more alive than the present.

In conclusion, it is worth drawing attention to poems by Graves and Sitwell which touch on similar themes, images, and sounds. During the course of their early careers, both poets use images from texts on witchcraft, popular superstition, eccentric behaviour from the past, and folklore to create the sense of alienated figures who are isolated within a particular poetic landscape: the dead man staked at the crossroads for a crime he may not have committed; the troll seeking love; the monster begging alms for the man who slayed him; or Sitwell's Satyr who is unable to chase nymphs due to the infirmities of old age. Sometimes, these figures are themselves poets, trapped within nursery landscapes which can be seen as both freeing and confining. In Sitwell's landscape, the poet is forced to listen to the small talk which she despises, whilst knowing important events are taking place just out of hearing. In Graves's nursery, the poet is both awed and cynical about the escape of words which are beautiful yet inexplicable.

It is worth note that these haunted poems, by two such distinct poetic voices, share so much common ground. For instance, Graves's poem "Reassurance to a Satyr", which contains a saturnine reflection of self-knowledge, appears to be an interior version of Sitwell's "Satyr in the Periwig", where the ill-fated Satyr, Scarabombadon, is crushed by his own persona (1926-30, 47-8; *Wooden Pegasus*, 39-40). Likewise, Graves's wonderful "heart's bird", in "The Voice of Beauty Drowned", which cries from the thicket but is drowned by other bird-songs, resembles Sitwell's poetic voice being lost in the din of small talk, and is precursor to her "bird that sings within the blood" which begins *The Sleeping Beauty* (1924) (*Georgian Poetry*, 88; *Sleeping Beauty*, 7). Sitwell echoes this call of the "heart's bird" in the haunting refrain of "The Man From A Far Countree", from the same volume, where the narrator sings of himself as being a "tree wherein the golden birds/ are singing in the darkest branches" (72). This lyrical, yet unsentimental, work has a Gravesian quality to it, just as Graves's "heart's bird" appears related to Sitwell's bird within the blood. Similarly, it could

be argued that Sitwell's gold-armoured ghost, haunting the Roman road, who "sighs over" the wheat, likewise resembles Graves's dead man in "The Stake", whose heart is enfolded by roots (*Collected*, 311; 14-26, 70-1). It is precisely such lyrical, folkloric images (the familiarity yet strangeness of what Sitwell terms, in "The Little Ghost Who Died For Love", the voice mourning among the ruins) which unite poems by both Graves and Sitwell, making a comparison of their works worthwhile (*Collected*, 180). For, whilst works by the two may differ, both remain aware of the persistent texture of poetry, the "heart's bird" which sings within the blood.

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