

# He & She & Oneness

Julia Simonne

## THREE LOCKED HOOPS

Yourself, myself and our togetherness  
Lock like three hoops, exempt from time and space.  
Let preachers preach of sovereign trinities,  
Yet can such ancient parallels concern us  
Unless they too spelt He and She and Oneness?

Robert Graves was, arguably, Britain's greatest love poet of the twentieth century and I was his last muse.

Why me? Proximity!

Robert and his second wife, Beryl, were old friends of my parents, George and Joanna Simon, and had been periodic visitors to our London house throughout my childhood. Indeed, Robert remembered me as a vivacious four-year old charging down the stairs to greet him one visit and hurling myself into his arms. I was a demonstrative and affectionate child, already showing the theatrical traits that would mould my later life.

Though our family had had persistent invitations to stay with the Graveses in Deyá, the beautiful Majorcan village where they lived, it was not until I was seventeen that my parents finally took up their generous offer. By this time, Robert was a strikingly virile seventy-one. I was at a vulnerable age and Robert, it turned out, was at a vulnerable stage – he was battling with his current muse and she was threatening withdrawal.

As fate ordained, soon after our arrival in Deyá in the summer of 1966, I fell victim to a severe case of gastric flu. My parents and young brother were staying up in the village while my sister and I were housed in a primitive fisherman's cottage tucked away in the olive groves just above the sea. The cottage had neither running water nor electricity and only a hole in the ground in an outhouse for a latrine. It was clearly not the right place for me to be in my present state. My concerned sister valiantly ran up the mountain to sound the alarm and I was soon rescued by Beryl in a little Seat car and driven up to be nursed back to the living in the cool civilization of Canellun, the main Graves house.

Bedridden and frail for several days, I was a captive audience for Robert who, not one to keep his traumas to himself, much to my surprise opened up his soul to me. He was soon bringing me in poems to read, written to his wayward muse, and cups of warm tea. I devoured both greedily but it was the poems, not the tea, that were to prove the superior remedy.

To my further surprise, Robert began asking me for *my* opinion on certain lines in the poems and, quite unhesitatingly, I gave them to him! Thus began

our poetic exchange. However, it was not until some months later that I actually took on the mantle of muse, a role I was to keep until his death in 1985 – and beyond – because it wasn't just about being inspiration for his writing, it was about sharing a process of thinking.

What united us was an unbreakable bond based on poetic thought. This became symbolized by a triad motif of three interlocking hoops – as in the poem 'Three Locked Hoops', at the head of this article. The hoops were representative of the three 'o's in *obosom*, a tribal, West African name for the divine spirit of love. The 'o's themselves, Robert deduced, stood for the possessive pronoun 'our', and the three consonants, the 'b-s-m', for *body-soul-magic*. Thus the *obosom* took on sudden significance for us. It became our poetic fuse – *our bodies, our souls, our magic*.

Looking through the collection of well over 250 poems which Robert wrote to me, 'Seven Fresh Years', written in 1973, perhaps best sums up the unique relationship he and I shared.

#### SONG: SEVEN FRESH YEARS

Two full generations  
Had parted our births  
Yet still I could love you  
Beyond all concealment,  
All fear, all reproach,  
Until seven fresh years  
Ruling distance and time  
Had established our truth.

Love brooded undimmed  
For a threatening new age,  
So we travelled together  
Through torment and error  
Beyond jealousy's eras  
Of midnight and dawn,  
Until seven fresh years  
Ruling distance and time  
Had established our truth.

The 'two full generations' in the first line, which 'had parted our births', was, in fact, a remarkable fifty-four years. The 'ruling distance and time' which 'had established our truth', in the last lines, was our ultimate understanding of what Robert termed love magic – an ability to work outside time and space, in the fourth and fifth dimensions, in order to 'make things happen'. However, to reach this plateau of understanding, we had to travel over a span of 'seven fresh

years' through periods of 'torment and error', which, at one time, almost cost us the poetic bond.

By any standard, ours was an extraordinary pairing but the age difference, far from being a problem, actually seemed an essential element in our bonding. It was as if we were two ends of the same life – Robert (as he wrote in a letter to me) as representative of one world and I of another, adding, 'I am not typical of the last two generations, nor are you typical of yours. I think we must both really belong to a world that hasn't yet come into being, but which we feel is already here.'

In October of 1966 it was Robert's turn to be nursed back to the living. He arrived in London to undergo a gall-bladder operation and I made regular visits to his hospital bedside where our conversations were dominated by talk of his muse and how best to get her back on the right path again. I had, by then, become a very close confidante and, unwittingly, was being seduced by the poet-muse spell.

Contrary to what one might expect, it was I who wrote the first poem to Robert and not the other way around. When I look back, I think what an absolute arrogance I must have had – but I didn't. It was a purely natural occurrence and reflective of the fact that I felt completely at ease and at one with Robert from the start. A poem just arrived so I simply showed it to him because it seemed the right thing to do, however naive.

It was I, too, who first declared what was to be a reciprocated and everlasting (though thoroughly unconventional) love based on poetic understanding. The occasion was one of my hospital visits (corroborated in later correspondence). I must have been unusually withdrawn, for Robert pestered me to know what the matter was. 'Why so glum?' he asked. 'I've fallen in love,' I said. 'With whom?' he goaded. 'With you ...' The event was as simple as that, the consequences, more complex.

By the time I entered Robert's poetic arena, it seemed he had already become a victim of his own mythology. He had written his definitive book on poetic myth, *The White Goddess*, back in the early forties and had then seemed in need of a perpetual re-embodiment of his title character in the form of a muse. His White Goddess, by definition, was a powerful, beautiful, intelligent temptress who would set him tasks, taunt him and finally betray him, and he had tired of the battlefield. He was now looking for his more compassionate Black Goddess who (and I quote here from his letter of 4 July 1968) 'is wisdom and never tortures or betrays her poet but simply loves and protects him and keeps his feet on the right path'. I didn't always live up to these criteria but that was, in part, Robert's fault, for he would sometimes confuse me with his White Goddess and create an unnecessary tension that put considerable strain on our poetic trust. However, in retrospect, the ordeals that threatened our poetic bond were, I believe, a very needed part of the journey on which we'd embarked. A journey in search of an unbreakable form of love – 'magical' love, 'poetical'

love, 'ideal' love.

To Robert, it seemed I had the perfect ingredients for his long searched-for Black Goddess, 'Youth, Truth, Beauty' as defined in his poem 'Tousled Pillow'. I came without baggage. I didn't have a 'history of tangled and tragic love-affairs' behind me or 'attempted suicides, divorces, unhappy childhood and a feeling that all men are enemies' (here, as elsewhere in this article, I am quoting from his letters to me). More importantly, perhaps, I had a mind 'untainted by a formal education'. I had freshness in my approach. I also had a direction. I was embarking on my own challenging career as a ballet dancer, a career Robert both appreciated and sympathised with as a profession as exacting as writing, if not more so. Despite my extreme youth, Robert always treated me as an equal. He respected my ideas and I was soon honoured with the additional title of 'fellow poet'.

### TOUSLED PILLOW

She appeared in Triad – Youth, Truth, Beauty –  
Full face and profiles whispering together  
All night at my bed-foot.

And when dawn came

At last, from a tousled pillow resolutely

I made my full surrender:

'So be it, Goddess, claim me without shame

And tent me in your hair.'

Since when she holds me

As close as candlewick to candleflame

And from all hazards free,

My soul drawn back to its virginity.

Though a septuagenarian, Robert was still very much in control of his life, albeit a somewhat eccentric and, at times, stormy one. He no longer wrote novels, preferring to dedicate himself almost entirely to his poetry – more exactly, *love* poetry. He thought of himself as a poet above all else and what he feared most was the desertion of the Muse without whose guidance he felt the 'Truth' could not be told. These lines from his poem 'The Moon's Last Quarter', written after a difficult patch six years into our relationship, best sum up his worst fears and the sort of anxiety which could torment him.

I do not fear death

But only pity, with forgetfulness

Of love's timeless vocabulary

And an end to poetry

With death's mad aircraft rocketing from the sky.

From the beginning, our relationship was built up on absence. We lived on different islands and had other commitments - our families, for instance and, in my case, my work in the ballet studio, which was daily becoming more and more demanding. I was answerable to a boss and company rules and regulations even if Robert had no such tethers. '[Y]ou are the professional', he wrote at one point, 'far more pressed for time & work than I am: besides, *in a sense*, you *are* my work. I mean the very centre of my huge poetic field, and my true female other self, which governs all that I write of real lasting importance.' This and other quotations extracted from our personal correspondence must be kept in strict context. Robert's creative centre was his poetry, a life-long journey that involved, along its way, the creative partnerships of seven women - two wives (Nancy Nicholson and Beryl Pritchard), Laura Riding and four muses. Biographically, Laura always seems to get lodged in a 'placeless' category unto herself, perhaps because she detachedly took on all roles. Each was a contributor in Robert's search for poetic truth, albeit to differing degrees and I, being the last, therefore became Robert's 'collective whole'.

Though our meetings were few, our relationship was augmented by a prolific correspondence and, once firmly rooted in Robert's poetical life, I finally began my educational journey. Classical, mythological and biblical references were expected staples in Robert's letters to me but he also wrote in depth about *his* eclectic theories and 'discoveries'. There were two themes which seemed prominent and earned his wrath in his early correspondence. One was the degradation of woman by male-dominated societies and the other, the pending catastrophe that greed and money would bring about. Indeed, the two were connected.

At times, I would get a letter containing a poem alongside a complicated analysis of its historical, linguistic or thematic background. It was very often far beyond my teenager's limited comprehension and I had little time outside my ballet world to devote to research. Fortunately, the seeds for my education were embedded within this correspondence, enabling me to catch up later. The following three poems, and the following extracts from letters that accompanied the poems, are examples of Robert's educational devices.

### TO OGMIAN HERCULES

Your Labours are performed, your Bye-works too,  
Your ashes gently drift from Oeta's peak.  
Here is escape then, Hercules, from empire.

Lithe Hebë, youngest of all Goddesses,  
Who circles on the Moon's broad threshing-floor  
Harboured no jealousy for Megara,  
Augè, Hippolytè, Deianeira,

But grieved for each in turn. You broke all hearts,  
 Burning too Sun-like for a Grecian bride.

Rest your immortal head on Hebe's lap;  
 What wars you started let your sons conclude.  
 Meditate a new Alphabet, heal wounds,  
 Draw poets to you with long golden chains  
 But still go armed with club and lion's pelt.

*Letter extract, October 1966:*

[Y]ou appear as 'Hebe' in that poem and I as Hercules. If you get hold of my *Greek Myths* [...] you will see what I mean about the alphabet and the golden chains for poets.[...] It never occurred to me that, like Hercules, with his Lion Skin after his final betrayal by Deianeira and his self-immolation on Mount Oeta, I would be rewarded for my labours with the love of the Immortal Goddess, Hebe ('youth') and never need to suffer again. Hebe is you. *Do you appreciate that?*

I did my homework twenty-nine years later when I was doing the research for the Performance Talk on which this article is based! As far as I can deduce from Robert's complex *Greek Myths* – a book which, incidentally, came into being as a direct result of a suggestion of my father's – the golden chain for poets refers to the Pillars of Heracles (known to the Romans as Hercules) which, in mythical terms, are alphabetical abstractions. In an ancient Welsh poem, the Celtic Heracles – whom the Irish called 'Ogma Sunface' and Lucian called 'Ogmios' – raised 'four columns of equal height capped with red gold' and these columns, each of five letters, formed the twenty-lettered Bardic alphabet known as the Boibel-Loth.

It is also interesting to note that the last line of the first verse of 'To Ogmian Hercules' is identical to the first line of a Laura Riding poem, 'Fragment 5', written some 36 years earlier! Laura herself, in an interview in the *Denver Quarterly* (Winter 1974) highlighted the fact. Her poem, which had originally been published with Robert's help in *Poems: A Joking Word* (Cape) in 1930, had long ceased to be in print.

SONG: FIG TREE IN LEAF

One day in early Spring  
 Upon bare boughs assembling  
 Sodalities of birds are seen  
 Clad all alike in pilgrim green  
 Their counts of love to bring.

The fig-tree's parable  
 For which our world is watchful,  
 Retold once more with wings displayed:  
 Her secret flower, her milk, her shade,  
 Her scarlet, blue and purple.

(I've used an early version of this poem, written to me in a letter in March 1967, as the word 'sodalities' was omitted in its eventual published form.)

Letter extract, 28 March 1967:

I wrote you a birthday poem, which seems very simple and is simple, but full of hidden allusions. [...] Sodalities of (thirty) birds are called *simurghs* in Persian and are the regular number of pilgrims in a company: they wear green which is the colour of holiness and seem about to fly on pilgrimage. (Like the new v-shaped leaves on the fig, which are flame-green). The 'Parable of the fig tree' is mentioned by Jesus (Mathew XXIV 32), but he doesn't take it far enough – just makes the sprouting a metaphor for the coming of summer. 'Secret' flower because the fig blossom is almost invisible, and the *milk* is valuable because it is used to curdle milk and make cheese[.] Scar-let blue and purple, the colours of the ripe fig[,.] are all royal colours. There are ten lines (the number of perfection) in the poem[.] Each stanza has five lines in honour of the fig leaf. And the fig leaf is emblematic of chastity: love reserved by lovers for each only.

Sort of compressed, but it makes sense even if you don't know the references.

(There are also references to the parable of the fig tree in Mark 13. 28. Other influences can be found in Matthew 24. 42, and Mark 13. 37.)

#### ROBBERS' DEN

They have taken Sun from Woman  
 And consoled her with Moon;  
 They have taken Moon from Woman  
 And consoled her with Seas;  
 They have taken Seas from Woman  
 And consoled her with Stars;  
 They have taken Stars from Woman  
 And consoled her with Trees;  
 They have taken Trees from Woman  
 And consoled her with Tilth;  
 They have taken Tilth from Woman  
 And have consoled her with Hearth;

They have taken Hearth from Woman  
 And consoled her with Praise –  
 Goddess, the robbers' den that men inherit  
 They soon must quit, going their ways,  
 Restoring you your Sun, your Moon, your Seas,  
 Your Stars, your Trees, your Tith, your Hearth –  
 But sparing you the indignity of Praise.

*Letter extract, 11 January 1969:*

This poem is historically true. Originally there was only a Goddess, not a God. Even the Sun was a woman – as *sun* is still feminine in Irish and German and probably Norse – but that was changed, and it became a Male. Woman was once also a Moon goddess, but then God claimed the moon as his own too; and the sea was taken from *Aphrodite* (Venus) and given to Neptune, and men took over astronomy; and woman originally had charge of all fruit trees, but then lost that; and of all sowing seed, but lost that; and then became Queen of the Hearth, but Man is now the Householder and the Hearth is his.

All the horrible things happening in the world are really a result of this degrading of woman by man, and man is now going mad with science and weapons and money and heartlessness and drugs and heading for a crash. The eventual result I hope, will be that woman resumes her ancient rule, but will be more considerate of men than she once was.

My higher education was put on hold while my career took off. By the time I was nineteen I was packing my trunks in preparation for my first job abroad – as a dancer with the Norwegian Ballet (now the Royal Norwegian Ballet). Before leaving, I decided I wanted to change my name for my new career. I had been christened Julia Simon and had I ended up in any other creative field, I might have settled with it. A dancer, however, gets constantly addressed by last name only and to have a sergeant-major-like boss bellowing out, 'Simon do this, Simon do that, Simon get into line', all the time just didn't appeal. Robert was a game collaborator in the name-finding task and we had many a mirthful moment choosing a new identity for me. One of the more irrational ideas was to shut my eyes and, at random, plonk a deft finger on a name in the telephone directory. I was happy to keep Julia but when, out of a myriad of possibilities, the telephone-book gamble produced 'Radio-Rentals' as a follow-up, I couldn't take the odds seriously. Equally flawed was a scheme by which I changed my entire name by complete invention for, though I liked the sound of it, it was like inventing another person altogether and whenever anyone called me by it, I never responded! Finally, I had the bright idea of simply feminising (and



thus softening) my own surname by adding another 'n' and an 'e'. Thus, with Robert's blessing in the form of a poem, I happily went off (and have stayed) as 'Simonne'.

### TO SIMONNE ON LEAVING HOME

Go, child, but not as any young man might,  
To free himself of parents and fight battles  
In his own name; nor as his sister might,  
Marrying whom she fancied and prolonging  
Gratitude to her parents by renewal  
Of home elsewhere, in their own steadfast plan.

Go because inner truth directs your going  
And let the necessary occasion seem  
No more than incidental. Love goes with you  
In distillation both of past and future –  
You, the wild torrent, flooding the mill-race  
Forcing its mill to grind  
A coarse grain into flour for angels' bread.

It is interesting to note that the last verse of this poem ended up, in published form, marginally changed, as the last verse of the poem 'The Superstition'.

It wasn't long before I was subjected to my first interview with a Norwegian national newspaper. Robert, who was used to hogging the limelight for himself, was amused and promptly wrote this tongue-in-cheek verse to record the event. In it, though, he confuses my private and public names.

### INTERVIEW

So Julie Simonne is your name?

You come from the Thames valley?

Your object, what? To heap more fame

On our Norwegian Ballet?

How well your rings and buttons shine

When down our streets you swagger!

Your 'yes' is like a glass of wine;

Your 'no' is like a dagger.

Smörbrot and whale-meat cannot sour  
 So clean and sweet a dancer –  
 Whence do you get your magic power?  
 We cannot guess the answer.

‘Smörbrot’ in this last verse should, I believe, be ‘smørbrod’.

Robert lived his life very publicly. I, on the other hand, was fiercely independent, proud and guarded the privacy of my private life with obsessive care (something that, with a bit of ingenuity and guile, one could do in those days!). Not only did I take on a public persona but I insisted Robert, too, should have some sort of cover when our travels coincided and we met on foreign territory. We agreed that I would always introduce him as my ‘godfather’, though, in actual fact, he was godfather to my elder sister, Helena. The plan served me unexpectedly well despite Robert’s habit of broadcasting such events in a poem.

#### INVITATION TO BRISTOL

‘Come as my doctor,  
 Come as my lawyer,  
 Or come as my agent  
 (First practise your lies)  
 For Bristol is a small town  
 Full of silly gossip  
 And a girl gets abashed by  
 Ten thousand staring eyes.’

‘Yes, I’ll come as your lawyer  
 Or as your god-father,  
 Or even as Father Christmas? –  
 Not half a bad disguise –  
 With a jingle of sleigh bells,  
 A sack full of crackers  
 And a big bunch of mistletoe  
 For you to recognize.’

For scenic backdrop to his poetry, Robert made constant use of the vista from his workroom with its sweeping olive groves, mountains and emerald sea. He also made regular use of the well-stocked garden surrounding the house, plucking from it individual trees and plants for poetic symbols.

## THE CRAB-TREE

Because of love's infallibility,  
 Because of love's insistence –  
 And none can call us liars –  
 Spring heaps your lap with summer buds and flowers  
 And lights my mountain peaks with Beltane fires.  
 The sea spreads far below; its blue whale's-back  
 Forcing no limit on us;  
 We watch the boats go by  
 Beyond rain-laden ranks of olive trees  
 And, rising, sail in convoy through clear sky.

Never, yet always. Having at last perfected  
 Utter togetherness  
 We meet nightly in dream  
 Where no voice interrupts our confidences  
 Under the crab-tree by the pebbled stream.

The crab-tree in this poem wasn't any random tree but the tree from which Robert harvested tart, bright pink, thumb-nail-sized apples for his annual batch of crab-jelly, of which he was most proud.

Another garden which Robert found inspirational was the little sanctuary at the back of our London house in Drayton Gardens. Though small, it seemed to have everything: festoons of scented flowers, fruit trees, a lawn and even a small lily-pond complete with goldfish, water-lilies and other wild life. Robert, whose great joy it was to find just the right gift, presented the garden with a pair of handsome, thoughtful-looking stone lions that he had come across on one of his numerous forays through the nearby Chelsea Antiques Market. The 'props' once complete, Robert's wonderfully fertile mind was immortalizing the garden, turning the familiar into the theatrical or cinematic. Starting in August 1967 and culminating in the subsequently published poem, 'Until We Both ...', written in 1970, Robert managed to transform our little garden into a Great Park.

## DRAYTON GREAT PARK (August 1967)

By powerful magic, often, after dark  
 Your tiny lawn expands to a great park,  
 Your lily pool to mere, the single tree  
 To an orchard, where you blew kisses at me  
 Across acres of flowers; and the black shed  
 Towers like a castle as I dream in bed.

## DRAYTON GREAT PARK II (October 1967)

This is Drayton Great Park  
 Where we stroll after dark  
 Hand in hand with no fear  
 Beside Drayton Great Mere,  
 Where pike, salmon and trout  
 Go cavorting about;  
 Then on, full of love,  
 Across Drayton Nut Grove  
 Where each nut is as big  
 As a loquat or fig;  
 Hand in hand, a gay pair,  
 Up the ancient stone stair  
 To the banks of massed flowers  
 And Drayton Great Towers  
 Which command a vast view  
 Right from Greenwich to Kew –  
 And there if you kiss me  
 Of course I'll kiss you.

## UNTIL WE BOTH ... (May 1970)

Until we both ...

Strolling across Great Park

With a child and a dog, greeting the guardian lions  
 At the royal entrance, slowly rounding the mere  
 Where boats are sailed all day, this perfect Sunday,  
 Counting our blessings peacefully enough ...

Until we both, at the same horrid signal,  
 The twelfth stroke of a clock booming behind us,  
 Sink through these nonchalant, broad, close-cut lawns  
 To a swirling no-man's land shrouded in smoke  
 That feeds our kisses with bright furnace embers,  
 And we beg anguished mercy of each other,  
 Exchanging vow for vow, our lips blistered ...

Until we both ...

Until we both at once ...

Have you more courage, love, even than I  
 Under this final torment?

Shall we ever again greet our guardian lions  
And the boats on the Great Mere?

This poem had an earlier draft titled 'Under the Knife' and was written when I was having an operation.

*Letter extract, 26 May 1970:*

The 25th was a terrible day for me naturally. So while you were under the knife, I wrote a nightmare poem which took several hours longer than the operation.

Uneven numbers, especially the numerals, 3, 5 and 7 (also 9 because of its triple three properties) were strong portents to Robert and of unequivocal poetic significance. His poetry and correspondence is littered with these powerful, symbolically-charged figures. He was so empowered by these numbers that even if, to an outsider, a particular number seemed unremarkable, he would manipulate its construction to feed his needs. 'March 13 is your good luck day', he wrote to me one February (13.03 being my birthday) 'and you will be 23, which is my Good Luck number' adding in brackets by way of clarification of his numeric formulae, '(2+3 =5)'. He was quick, too, to discover that both names, Robert and Julia, had five letters (the two 'r's in Robert being counted as one).

FIVE

Five beringed fingers of Creation,  
Five candles blazing at a shrine,  
Five points of her continuous pentagram,  
Five letters in her name – as five in mine.  
I love, therefore I am.

The Zodiac was yet another of Robert's fascinations. 'You know that I was born under Leo and his planet the Sun', he declared in a letter to me. He was proud of the fact and made much of his Leo-ness and would have been highly dismissive of a claim by the Royal Astronomical Society in 1995 that they could identify a thirteenth constellation in the Zodiac which would have pushed his birth date back into the Cancer sign! I, on the other hand, defiantly remain a Piscean by the code of either chart. Robert also pointed out that the heart was the part of the body associated with Leo and that Pisces governed the feet, which was, he explained, why I liked having my feet massaged when feeling under the weather.

## FOOT-HOLDER-ROYAL

As Court foot-holder to the Queen of Fishes

I claim prescriptive right

To press the royal instep when she wishes

And count her toes all night.

Some find me too assiduous in my task.

That is for her to say; they need but ask.

Gifts too were poetic metaphors at Robert's disposal, especially gems – not necessarily valuable ones, but real ones. Ones he could appropriate as poetical symbols either for their colour or changing properties, or an opaqueness or transparency. One of my favourite examples of this poetic use of gems is in his poem 'Song: Dew-drop and Diamond', in which he likens me to Nature's dew-drop 'Poised on a red rose-petal' which 'carries in its eye / Mountain and forest, sea and sky, / With every change of weather', while likening his former muse to a diamond which 'Contrariwise [...] splits / The prospect into idle bits / That none can piece together'.

Robert despaired of my flagrant, theatrical disregard for the superiority of the *real*. In my teens I covered every one of my fingers with ostentatious rings, jamming gold alongside base metal and gems against junk. Patiently, Robert taught me to appreciate the magic of true craftsmanship and to recognise a real stone by testing whether it stayed cool when placed against the tongue.

## WITH A GIFT OF RINGS

It was no costume jewellery I sent:

True stones cool to the tongue, their settings ancient,

Their magic evident.

Conceal your pride, accept them negligently

But, naked on your couch, wear them for me.

I preferred silver to gold when I was young. Robert went along with this rather unconventional bent and from time to time instructed his old Majorcan jeweller friend, Fermí-n, a true craftsman, to fashion me a simple ring or bracelet. I went through a 'serpent' phase and Fermí-n made me a beautiful flexible silver serpent for my little finger which had two very discreet, uncut emeralds for eyes. I treasured this piece and was mortified one night, on tour in Nice with the London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet), to discover, while walking back from a restaurant, sun-burned and heavily moisturised, that the ring had somehow slipped from my finger. I persuaded a dancer friend to try and retrace our steps with me, no mean task since our track had taken us along a grassy verge alongside a dual carriageway that, at one point, we had crossed. The ring could

have fallen off anywhere. I was beside myself. Luckily, I remembered Robert telling me about St Antony, the patron saint of the poor and the one responsible for finding lost things, so I frantically prayed to him for help in finding my ring.

When we arrived back at the restaurant, the chairs were already up on the tables and the cleaning woman was sweeping the floor. No, the ring hadn't been handed in and no, the cleaning lady hadn't come across it and a collective thorough search proved unproductive too. We were about to leave, defeated, when something – St Antony, I suppose – made us turn back and take a closer look under the table where we'd sat. And, there, barely visible in a piled mess of food bits and dust, which the cleaning lady had so casually dismissed as rubbish to be swept into her waiting pan, was the ring. Sweet, wonderful St Antony, a blessing on him!

### ST ANTONY OF PADUA

Love, when you lost your keepsake,  
The green-eyed silver serpent,  
And called upon St Antony

To fetch it back again,  
The fact was that such keepsakes  
Must never become idols  
And meddle with the magic

That chains us with its chain:  
Indeed the tears it cost you  
By sliding from your finger  
Was Antony's admonishment

That magic must remain  
Dependent on no silver ring  
Nor serpent's emerald eyes  
But equally unalterable,

Acceptable and plain ...  
Yet none the less St Antony  
(A blessing on his honesty!)  
Proved merciful to you and me  
And found that ring again.

There were other stories concerning other rings, worked into other poems, all reflective of Robert's unshakeable belief in the magical powers that carefully chosen artifacts could command, especially their powers to ward off disaster or enhance *love-magic*. Rings, by definition, were literally on hand and it is not surprising that when either of us faced genuinely life-threatening situations, we turned to a ring for strength to cope with the ordeal. This happened when I nearly died in an aeroplane which had lost pressure and then engine power

and was nose-diving towards the sea. The same defiance of death was achieved through the medium of a ring when Robert fell, head first, several metres down a rocky cliff, on his way to the beach. Both incidents are hinted at in the poem 'Love Charms'.

### LOVE CHARMS

How closely these long years have bound us  
 Stands proved by constant imminence of death –  
 On land, on water, and in the sky –  
 As by our love-charms worn on the same finger  
 Against a broken neck or sudden drowning –  
 Should we debate them?

To have done with quarrels and misunderstandings  
 Seems of small import even though emphasizing  
 The impossibility of a fatal breach.

And yet how strange such charms may seem, how wanton,  
 And forced on us by what? Not by the present  
 Nor the past either, nor the random future:  
 Here we lie caught in love's close net of truth.

On more than one occasion Robert quoted me the Irish saying, 'It is death to love a poet, death to deceive a poet and death to be a poet', by which definition I had, indeed, looked death squarely in the eyes. But death was something I had a hard time coming to terms with.

It was this fear of death, on my part, and the ensuing discussions on the subject with Robert, that focussed him on what he felt was his most important 'discovery' in the area of poetical thinking since *The White Goddess*. He came up with a theory on death which, to him, made sense of his life: 'The moment of death, contrary to all ordinary thinking, was when one decides on one's birth.' The theory was elaborated in correspondence to me.

*Letter extract, 20 April 1970:*

It is no answer to the question 'why I am myself?['] to say, 'God made me so'; because God is a question-mark not a definable power. Nor do I ever excuse myself by saying: 'I had an unhappy childhood', blaming my sins on my parents. I prefer to say that I am wholly responsible for being myself, for choosing my parents and my nativity and my birthplace, and for everything that has happened to me until now and will happen until my death. Who else could have done it? If I am then asked: 'Do you believe in Re-incarnation?' I answer 'No, because I am the expression of a combination of genes, which I chose myself.



Re-incarnation[,] or reincarnation[,] would mean a different set of genes and inherited memories'[,] If I am then asked, 'Then at what time did you take these decisions about yourself?' I answer 'Time is a convenience, not a fixed irreversible flow, which man is capable of disregarding (in the sense of fixed fated occurrence) and which, in poetry and other trance-like fifth-dimensional circumstances, he can bend and use just as in the fourth dimensions [*sic*] he can bend and use space. From the point of distant stars, I will not be born for millions of light-years; but I have my fixed place in the universe and this can never be altered. If therefore I am asked, 'When did you decide on your birth?' I answer: 'In the moment of death, when alone I have a full conspectus of my life, which is a sort of capsule containing an endless circle, head swallowing tail[.]

### A TOAST TO DEATH

This is, indeed, neither the time nor the place  
 For victory celebrations. Victory over what?  
 Over Death, his grinning image and manifesto  
 Of which, as children, we have been forewarned  
 And offered a corpse's frigid hand to kiss.

Contrariwise, let me raise this unsteady glass  
 In a toast to Death, the sole deviser of life,  
 Our antenatal witness when each determined  
 Sex, colour, humour, religion, limit of years,  
 Parents, place, date of birth –  
 A full conspectus, with ourselves recognized  
 As viable capsules lodged in the fifth dimension,  
 Never to perish, time being irrelevant,  
 And the reason for which, and sole excuse, is love –  
 Tripled togetherness of you with me.

Robert's Black Goddess poems manifest themselves in his later work and concern his theories on genius, timelessness, death as one's birth, and fourth- and fifth-dimensional thinking; some of which subjects he also wrote about in essay form and published in his 1972 collected essays, *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers*. In the Black Goddess poems Robert is, in effect, exploring immortality. In them he removes himself and, as his muse, me too, from all the conventional tethers of time and three-dimensional thinking and discovers what he had always been searching for, a way to make love everlasting.

*Letter extract, 6 June 1973, in reference to the poem 'Fast Bound Together':*

It was one of these heavenly gifts; woke me up while I was going to sleep,

dead tired, one afternoon, and insisted on three hours of writing. And reassures me once more of our immortality: I don't mean immortality in the vulgar literary sense, I mean that we have found out how love over-rides the concept of death and of simple physical desire.

### FAST BOUND TOGETHER

Fast bound together by the impossible,  
 The everlasting, the contempt for change,  
 We meet seldom, we kiss seldom, seldom converse,  
 Sharing no pillow in no dark bed,  
 Knowing ourselves twin poets, man with woman,  
 A millennial coincidence past all argument,  
 All laughter and all wonder.

Of our poetical union, Robert wrote, 'The bond rests on a way of thought which we call 'magical' and the word refers to the ancient Persian *magos* whose task was to use the secret powers of their genius – meaning to think in a way that gave them power to perform apparently impossible feats but always for the right reasons.'

Some critics deride the late poetry as written by a man past his time; a man scarred by the trauma of repeated surgical operations, a man no longer in control of his astute poetical reasoning. Even at the time of publication, his later collections of poetry got very mixed reviews. Some were politely dismissive, some positively damning, the general consensus being that Robert was, by then, too old for love poetry and should have put down his pen long ago. But Robert was not a man to rest on his laurels. As a poet, he was his own master, answerable only to the Muse and not the public. He was in the habit of questioning until he had found answers and to have forsaken the Muse while she still taunted would have seemed irresponsible – ungentlemanly, to say the least!

Every artist goes through what are conveniently termed, in art-historian parlance, 'periods', and within each of these, a great artist is lucky to nurture two or three enduring masterpieces. Since the accompanying body of work is part of an exploration to reach an ultimate statement, without it, there would be no real evaluation nor, perhaps, the masterpiece itself. Generally, the lesser works get heavily pruned out of collections that are made available to the public. This was not the case in Robert's final collection of poems published in 1975, which most critics deemed top-heavy. However, rather than being outrightly dismissive of Robert's final 'period', I suggest that both scholar and layman reappraise these works without bias or preconception. There *are* several 'enduring' poems that will eventually jump out from the page. There is also a rare opportunity to get an insight into the thoughts and actions, however trivial, that inspire a poet to put pen to paper in the first place, heedless of the results. Love poetry comes

into being because of the inspiration, thoughts and actions of a complementing individual. The poem initially starts off as a very private correspondence but, once published, instantly becomes public property.

'It is funny', Robert often said to me, 'how people think I've written a poem specially for them' and, indeed, while he was getting flak from reviewers and scholars, Robert was equally getting fan-mail from strangers thanking him for writing a particular poem to them!

### THE STRAYED MESSAGE

Characteristic, nevertheless strange:  
 Something went badly wrong at the Exchange,  
 And my private message to you, in full detail,  
 Got broadcast over eleven frequencies  
 With the usual, though disquieting, consequences  
 Of a torrential amatory fan-mail.

In this article I have deliberately used some of Robert's lesser and previously unpublished poems in order to illustrate the 'private conversation' behind our poetic relationship. Whether good or bad, I am proud to have been the birth-mistress of so many of Robert's poems and to have given him his poetic navigation in his final years of writing.

### THE NARROW SEA

With you for mast and sail and flag,  
 And anchor never known to drag,  
 Death's narrow but oppressive sea  
 Looks not unnavigable to me.

Ultimately, speech, at moments of complete oneness, becomes superfluous and the strongest and most extraordinary sensation is the absolute knowledge communicated in that silence.

### TOUCH MY SHUT LIPS

Touch my shut lips with your soft forefinger,  
 Not for silence, but speech –  
 Though we guard secret words of close exchange,  
 Whispering each with each,  
 Yet when these cloudy autumn nights grow longer  
 There falls a silence stronger yet, we know,  
 Than speech: a silence from which tears flow.