

# The Influence of Robert Graves on my 'Sibyl' Poems

*Ruth Fainlight*

Listening to the previous speakers at this conference has made me realise how very much we all are the products of the cultural climate of our youth – how similar the influences we share. A teenaged poetry-loving art student who strode down the street intoning lines from *The Waste Land* and 'Byzantium', I remember the exact volume in which I first encountered the poetry of Robert Graves: a second-hand copy of *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, published in 1936. His poems thrilled me, both technically and thematically. It was also thrilling that the anthology included poems by Laura Riding, and the little I knew about their relationship and the years they spent in Mallorca made me regard them as exemplary romantic figures, as well as excellent poets. Later, when I came to Mallorca in my early twenties and lived on the island for four years, meeting and talking to Robert did not disillusion me. By that time, I had also read the Claudius books, and others of his historical novels like *The Golden Fleece* and *King Jesus*. I was enthralled by his references to Roman, Greek and Middle Eastern mythology. Different again was his 'Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth', *The White Goddess*. Heady stuff for a young woman.

But in spite of the fascination of the White Goddess, and Robert's impressive scholarship, when I read: 'However, woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing', I knew I could not agree with him. I might be uncertain about almost everything else, but I was sure of my vocation as a poet. Graves did qualify this edict somewhat, though, because he continued: 'This is not to say that a woman should refrain from writing poems; only, that she should write as a woman, not as if she were an honorary man. [...] It is the imitation of male poetry that causes the false ring in the work of almost all women poets.' (It was hard

to know exactly what he meant by ‘woman’s poetry’ – but presumably, in his opinion, Laura Riding managed to avoid this mistake.)

In those student days, as well as poetry, a book I read with great attention was Fraser’s *Golden Bough*. (I still have the battered Abridged Edition which I bought when I was seventeen.) What I remembered from Fraser, and from *The White Goddess* – where Aeneas, that golden mistletoe bough in hand, visits the Underworld to question his father: ‘Aeneas sacrificed a bull and let the blood gush into a trough, and the ghost of Anchises [...] drank the blood and obligingly prophesied about the glories of Rome’ (‘Of course,’ Robert continues, in one of his characteristic, suspiciously reasonable explanations, ‘the ghost did not really lap the blood, but a lapping sound was heard in the dark; what happened was that the Sibyl, who conducted Aeneas below, drank the blood and it produced in her the desired prophetic ecstasy’) – I am sure created the images in my mind which became the source, decades later, for many of my poems about the Sibyl. For example:<sup>1</sup>

#### AENEAS’ MEETING WITH THE SIBYL

Hunched over rustling leaves spread out before her  
 on the stony ground, like a skinny gypsy  
 with a joint dripping ash in the corner of her mouth  
 quizzing the Tarot cards, pulling the shabby  
 shawl closer round elbows and shoulders, then squinting  
 shrewdly sideways up at a nervous client,  
 the Sibyl greeted Aeneas. ‘Don’t tell it from them,’  
 he pleaded. She was sitting cross-legged, right at the door  
 of her cave, (Apollo! he thought, it’s draughty here,  
 no wonder she looks so pinched and cold), and he’d heard  
 how often the wind would shuffle the leaves into total  
 confusion, which she didn’t seem to notice or  
 amend. ‘Don’t show them to me. Say it in words.’

‘You’re all the same,’ she grumbled. ‘Always wanting

more than you pay for. Of course,' – tilting her head  
sideways on that mole-strewn stringy neck  
(he saw white hairs among her dusty curls)  
an inappropriate cajoling smile  
distorting her archaic features – 'if  
you give me something extra, I'll do you a special.'  
The tattered russet-purple layers of skin  
and cloth wrapped around her body dispersed  
an ancient odour of sweat or incense as her movements  
stirred them. Through a hole in the skirt he glimpsed  
a lean and sinewy thigh, and feet bound up in rags.  
'Come inside, young man,' she ordered. 'We'll be private there.'

Remembering what came next: his search for the golden  
bough, their descent into Hades, the twittering shades,  
his painful meeting with Dido, the Sibyl's answer  
to Palinurus, and then, at last, what he'd wanted:  
embracing Anchises his father, and learning  
the destiny of their descendants, the future  
of Rome, Aeneas found it hard to reconcile  
his first impressions with the awesome figure  
who led him safely through the realm of death  
and to the daylight world again. He looked  
back from the shore to where she crouched outside  
her cave, waiting for another questioner –  
and saw she had assumed the same disguise.

I do not know whether any of the actual Sibyls – because at  
ancient sacred sites such as Delphi, Cumaea, Dodona, etc., real  
women filled this role – were poets; I don't think any of mine are.  
But the influence of Robert's ideas about the shift from  
matriarchal to patriarchal power seems very evident behind the  
argument of this poem:

#### THE CIMMERIAN SIBYL

These habits come from the old place,  
customs brought from home: almost  
the only memories of endless

trees, a northern waste of cold  
and dark beyond the Caucasus.

Because it was always so, here  
on the shores of the Hellespont I still  
must have my drum and lance, the three  
mushrooms and sacred feathers, before  
I rise to heaven and touch the stars.

Everything I know was taught  
by the last sibyl able to recall  
those days. Crippled, toothless, and blind,  
she told me tales of how we fled  
the Scythians, and ravaged Thrace.

I learned the steps of the magic dance  
(my body burned in trance, the music's  
beat made me gulp gallons of water  
to quench such thirst); got by heart  
the words that trap the reluctant god.

He slides under my skin as smoothly  
as the blade of a knife in the hand of one  
who slits the pelt and pours warm blood  
from the throat of a perfect sacrifice.  
Does god or sibyl then pronounce?

But now we are too near Greece, and priests  
interpret my oracles, move  
between me and the god, stifle my power,  
altering the ritual;  
fearful; changing the old ways.

The manipulation of the Sibyl by masculine powers is a theme  
throughout the two sequences.

#### THE DELPHIC SIBYL

The tripod, the laurel leaves, the robe and style

of a virgin, though I was an honest widow of fifty:  
because of my sober gaze and my docility,  
the elders of Delphi chose me and taught me  
what had to be done with the tripod and laurel leaves.  
They offered a drink from the holy stream, showed me  
the cleft in the rock where I must sit and breathe  
mephitic fumes and chew the leaves until  
my head began to swim and words came blurred.  
Those gentlemen of Delphi's best, most ancient  
families, our city's noble priests,  
quite overwhelmed me. I was a simple woman,  
obedient, eager to please, and honoured  
by the role. And even had I wanted to,  
been bribed to do, there was no chance  
to slant the auguries. Petitioners  
would proffer written questions first to them,  
and their interpretation of my drugged  
and mumbled ravings was determined  
by Apollo's demands and the city's political needs.  
I was an ideal oracle, they told me.  
Thus I grew old, though monthly more confused,  
appalled, exhausted, and in every way  
the opposite of all I once assumed.

It was said that the Great Mother Goddess in her manifestation as Python, to whom the shrine originally belonged (the Delphic sibyl was also called the Pythia), had been usurped by the priests of Apollo.

#### DESTRUCTION OF A SIBYL

Right from the start, the Pythia was depressed.  
Every omen came unfavourable.  
He'd been on duty at the sanctuary, and  
afterwards, telling his friend Plutarch  
about the catastrophe, Nicander, one  
of the priests at Delphi, could still remember her screams.

She'd gone into the proper trance, but how

reluctantly; at once began to speak  
in a strange, hoarse voice. Whatever dumb and evil  
spirit had possessed her would not reveal  
its origin. No curse the priests pronounced could  
banish it, protect her or themselves.

Like a ship on a stormy sea, foundering,  
when bales of precious cargo are jettisoned  
and the galley-slaves pull harder and faster because  
of the lash, though their oars have splintered, she lurched  
and shuddered, struggling to escape, tried to crawl  
on bleeding hands and knees towards the door.

That cowardice could never be purged. No matter  
how long they lived, the whole College of Priests  
would not forget the shame. Everyone fled.  
Contagion of fear: panic alone had ruled.  
Apollo's priests abandoned their oracle,  
and when they returned, found her broken and changed.

Python uncoiled herself, in all the glistening  
length of her body, come back to remind them  
of the ancient goddess, the Mother Apollo usurped.  
It was She who had spoken and claimed the soul  
of the Pythia to serve at Her altar and be  
Her oracle forever in the underworld.

In his novel *I, Claudius* Graves refers to the Sibylline Books – which were certainly real. They were kept at Rome in a stone chest and consulted in times of crisis for the predictions and advice they contained. In the sixth century B.C., the Cumaean Sibyl of the time supposedly brought the original nine books of Greek verses to the Roman king Tarquin and offered to sell them. He refused. She destroyed three and offered the remaining six at the same price. Again he refused. She destroyed three more, which persuaded him to buy the three that were left. I tell the story quite simply in this poem:

### THE CUMAEAN SIBYL I

She was the one who, three by three,  
burned her books of prophecy  
when the asking price would not be met.  
Like a wise old nurse who knows that children  
rage and fret, but when night comes,  
creep back into her arms, she watched  
the flames, abstracted, stern, and calm.

Her face seemed veiled, the net of lines  
a mask, a zone of darker air  
penumbra of another atmosphere,  
as though she stood before a fire  
deep in her cave, brooding upon  
time past and still to come, far from  
this splendour and destruction.

Tarquinius Superbus gasped  
and broke the silence. 'I'll pay your price.  
More than my nurse or mother, Sibyl,  
is your worth to me, your prophesies  
and wisdom.' 'The same price as for all  
the nine.' 'Agreed.' She raised her hand,  
the fire died, the last three books were saved.

Another story, with a more Christian tone (inspired by the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel) concerning the same sibyl is told in:

### THE CUMAEAN SIBYL II

Because she forgot to ask for youth  
when Apollo gave her as many years  
as grains of dust in her hands, this sibyl  
personifies old age: and yet  
those withered breasts can still let down  
celestial milk to one who craves  
redemption: a dry tree, not a green,

the emblem of salvation.

And so I was well primed and prepared to respond with an enthusiastic ‘Yes’ to the invitation by the American artist Leonard Baskin to collaborate with him on a sequence of poems about Sibyls. He had already started work on drawings and prints – and it was our mutual friend Ted Hughes who suggested that he approach me about the project.

Reading through my Sibyl poems years after writing them, I find parallels between my conception of the poet and the Sibyl. I know that Robert believed in the higher destiny of the poet, and the sacred character of poet and prophet. On the evidence of my own writing (because I only know what I think when I read what I have written), it seems I also believe that the Sibyl, like the poet, is set apart, with special obligations and duties, and a power which can be benevolent or can be turned against her.

#### INTROSPECTION OF A SIBYL

If only I could be aware of what is happening  
in that void, that gap, that murky, fathomless cleft  
where space and time must exist  
between inspiration and the sound of my own voice:  
the truth I never once have heard  
a moment earlier than my listeners.

But I am no more conscious of the prophecies  
than I can understand the language of birds.  
A bird is singing now.  
In spite of legend, like everyone else,  
I wonder and guess at its message. My oracles  
Come like birdsong – or how I imagine  
they must begin to sing: by instinct,  
neither needing nor able to think.

The most terrible phrases burst from my mouth.  
My profession is to doom strangers.  
Already, as a girl,

playing ball with my friends in the village square  
or feeding my tame pigeon, I remember  
being more appalled than my parents  
by what I'd say: an unforgivable insult  
dealt out in all innocence, or a blurted sentence  
like a gift to confirm good fortune.

How I admire control, and yearn to achieve it.  
I've become almost grateful to those who control me.  
Before, I never knew when it would begin.  
But the closed, startled expressions  
on the faces of those standing round  
– as though shutters crashed down –  
meant again I'd defined or foretold,  
unerringly exposed the poor secret  
some old man kept hidden all his life:  
with sight as sharp as an eagle  
who spots the frightened creature  
veering back and forth, exhausted,  
across a rocky mountainside,  
maddened by the shadow of its wings –  
and heavier than every element,  
surer than the laws of gravity,  
swoops for the kill.

After a few times, you recognize  
a universal wariness. It takes longer  
to fear yourself, to accept the certainty  
of never illuminating that blankness,  
that vital hiatus when the demon or angel,  
the god, perhaps, takes possession  
and you don't exist  
yet have the power of a god.

Panic of falling – said to be  
the sole inborn fear of a human infant.  
Deeper than fear, I've learned, lies the greatest pleasure:  
nausea and exhilaration of plummeting free,  
the glee of surrender to nullity,

temptation more primal  
than any craving for security.

And the price for such knowledge? To have  
absolutely no command over your life,  
your words – no possibility  
of calculated effects or tactics or policy.  
But how useful you can be to others; and how lucky  
if rather than burning or stoning, they protect you,  
feed you, and let the simple folk praise you,  
keep you safe as a caged bird,  
and call you a sibyl.

The poems so far are from the first sequence, written in the 1970s. The book never materialised – but the subject occupied me for more than a year, and I had produced a group of twenty-seven poems. I was not displeased. When, in the late 1980s, Leonard asked me to write a new sequence for a dozen new woodcuts, I did not know if I could return to the subject after so long. But when I saw the proofs of what he had done, it was impossible to resist. Prints and poems, in a folio titled *Twelve Sibyls*, had their first publication in 1991 by an American fine art publisher, the Gehenna Press, and the poems were included in my 1993 collection *This Time of Year*.

There can be no doubt about the enduring effect on me of Robert's poetry and his writings about religion and mythology – most especially about Sibyls. I never asked him if he believed in any of it; now I wonder why, and wish I had. But I suspect that for him, as it has been for me, the centrality and mystery of religious belief in every culture, at every time and in every place, never ceased to fascinate. Here are a few of the poems from *Twelve Sibyls*.

#### SQUATTING AT THE WOMB'S MOUTH

Swaddled in feathers and cloth  
a keen old face peers out through

what could be the entrance to a burrow  
or a hanging nest

but she is not that sibyl, so shrunken, so ancient  
who pleaded for death

her gaze is too cool  
with an abbess's shrewdness, an ambassador's  
judgement, the tolerance  
and wisdom of the Great Mother

squatting at the womb's mouth  
giving birth to herself.

#### DREAMY

Since early this morning  
the big blonde sibyl is dreaming,  
hunched over, clasping her knees,  
like a girl at the edge of a field  
staring into the tall grass  
toward a distant line of trees,  
remembering where she came from,  
how the look and smell of everything  
was different.

One of the temple birds  
has settled on her back.  
The dusty weight feels comforting.  
She senses it is just as mournful  
and dreamy as she. The bird  
is brooding migration,  
a river glinting direction,  
hearing again the raucous cries of the flock.

They know they will not leave  
this place. They both belong to the god  
now, forever.

### ELEGANT SIBYL

Having become an expert at false tones  
as the voices slide lower or higher than intended  
out of control, having heard so many lies  
seen so many faces altering crazily  
trying to hide their real motives,  
having pondered the fate of those who came to consult her  
and how little difference any words make,  
her gaze is now withdrawn and watchful as a diplomat's.  
Her lips, though still full, meet firmly in a straight hard line.

But her feathered cloak and tall head-dress of glorious plumage  
are so elegant, no-one can resist her.  
The Emperor comes to hear her pronounce almost daily.  
All the rich men's wives copy her style.

Alone at last, she strips off her regalia  
lets the fine cloak drop to the floor  
pushes strong fingers through the stubble of cropped hair  
and climbs into the deep stone bath of water so cold  
that even at the height of summer she shudders, and in winter  
the effort of will the action demands  
has become her greatest indulgence.

Only then is she able to think of the god and wait his pleasure.

### THE EGG MOTHER

In the same soothing tone the god uses  
before he mounts her, she whispers  
secrets that the stars and trees have told her  
against the bird's warm neck  
then grips him firmly around feathery sides.

His strong wings raise them high above the coast

and follow the river's trail  
glinting up the valley to its mountain  
source. Brought on the backs  
of their oracular birds to a rock-strewn field

below the summit line, sibyls gather:  
the Delphic and the Persian,  
Cumaean, Erythraean, Tiburtine,  
and those from even further –  
sudden green oases, weed-fringed islands.

As if it were the Orphic World Egg,  
a silver moon floats up  
to signal her arrival, and all the women  
turn to watch the bird  
settle, and catch her first words and smiles.

Using the same tones their gods do,  
gentling them into submission,  
she strengthens her sisters for their stern duties.  
She is the oldest now.  
Her time has come to be the Egg Mother.

I'll finish with a poem from the first sequence, which could only have been written by someone who had lived in Mallorca – in Soller, to be specific, where I lived with Alan Sillitoe for more than four years. First, here is an extract from the sleeve notes to the CD of *Cant de la Sibila*, by Monserrat Figueras (soprano), with La Capella Reial, conducted by Jordi Savall:

It is not then very surprising that the early Christians retained the myth of the Sibyl, restoring it as an oracle for the second coming of Christ, for the last judgement and the end of the world. [...] The Latin version was the basis for the performance of the Sibyl's chant during Christmas matins in France, Italy, Castile and especially the Catalan region, at least from the tenth century. In the thirteenth century the Sibyl's chant was also celebrated in the vernacular in France, in Provence and in the Catalan region

and it is in the latter that it has lingered on until now, despite the ban imposed on it at the end of the sixteenth century. It is certainly the most ancient of the Catalan dramaturgy [...] sung in the fifteenth century at Barcelona Cathedral and at Palma in Majorca – Convents of the Conception and of Santa Margarita.

– and, as described in the following poem, it also survives in Soller de Mallorca.

### THE SIBILA

*Sung at midnight on Christmas Eve by a young boy dressed in a rich, long robe and carrying a sword, in the Church of San Bartolomé and Nuestra Señora de Bonany, co-patrons of Soller de Mallorca, Islas Baleares, Spain.*

The Day of Judgement comes  
when there will be no Holy Service.  
The Universal King of man,  
God Eternal, then will judge us,  
to everyone deliver justice.

Terrible fires will tear Heaven apart.  
Lakes, springs, and rivers all aflame.  
Even the fish will scream.

To the good He will say,  
Come my blessed children  
possess the Kingdom  
which has been waiting  
since the world was first created.

Humble Virgin, who this night gave birth  
to infant Jesus, pray  
He guard us from damnation's wrath.

With great severity and sternness

to the wicked He will say,  
Go, evil ones, to everlasting torment  
to the fire eternal,  
to the Inferno and your Prince of Darkness.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All these poems are included in Ruth Fainlight, *New & Collected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2010).