

Dance of Words: Cultural Influences on Robert Graves's Later Life and Work

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In early adulthood, Robert's circle of friends consisted mostly of other writers, artists, scholars, intellectuals and the occasional classical musician. By the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s, coinciding with a new burst in his popularity, Robert was also meeting and befriending people in the glittering worlds of film, theatre, ballet and jazz. The inclusive, flamboyant, extrovert personas of performing artists seemed to suit his own theatrical leanings.

I was Robert's last muse and a ballet dancer by profession. Often, in letters to me, he would refer to a particular artistic collaboration that he had embarked on, or was about to do so.

'I had a wonderful letter from Jerry Robbins in answer to one of mine', Robert wrote of the acclaimed American choreographer Jerome Robbins, ' – very anxious to come to Deyá this summer & talk to me about ballet [...]. He's tops, as you know, and a very close friend.'¹

Robert took a keen interest in all the arts but, with regard to his poetry, music and dance were, arguably, the two most influential. References to both can be found throughout his work – perhaps not surprisingly, in the light of their Classical connections.

'Greek poetry', Robert wrote, 'began with a ritual dance-song to the hexameter–pentameter meter around an image of the Goddess, beginning *Alphita Baettula*; and Homer adopted it for general purposes.'²

In another letter, he enthused:

I have been reading Lucian, a Greek author of the 1st Century A.D, about Dancing ... He says that all over the Roman Empire the greatest interest in the theatre was ballet: of which the subject was always the *Greek Myths*. They

were danced, it seems, with mime, but not the complicated signally mime-signs of modern ballet – just pure passionate impersonation in dance, like Marcel Marseau [*sic*] *plus*. – It's a pity the tradition hasn't lasted, but in England we have no native myths of any power – Alfred & the Burned cakes, Dick Whittington & his Cat aren't passionate enough, really are they?³

A year later, Robert was still mulling over Lucian and the Classical roots of dance.

The Greek and Roman ballet was mostly acting-dancing [...]. I have a very close description of it in a 1st Century book by Lucian called 'On Dancing' (But there was also ballet dancing on points – and without ballet shoes, poor creatures!) ... Jerry Robbins makes his 'children' dance poems out to show they understand the meaning of the rhythms.⁴

And in yet another letter, he wrote:

[B]allet is as exacting a profession as poetry: you know that poetry begins with dance and that the immensely subtle rhythms of real poetry, which go with the meaning, are based on physical motion to music?⁵

While Robert had a natural musical ear, he never mastered the art of playing a musical instrument. Nonetheless, he did have a considerable knowledge of their historical uses, resonances and symbolic properties and used a variety of individual instruments – the drum, flute, horn, violin, harp and double-bass, to name a few – in different contexts throughout his poetry. The same applied to his understanding of dance. Despite having had no formal training, he had extensive knowledge of its historical place, terminology and symbolic properties, which he also used to good effect in his poetry.

Robert loved dance. He also, unusually for a man by then in his seventies, loved *to* dance, whether at a party for ‘teen-agers only’, as he wrote in his 1969 poem ‘How It Started’, where he had shown off his own brand of African-influenced moves, or at a black tie charity ball where, suitably attired, he had once partnered me in a surprisingly passable waltz.

Robert had natural confidence and physical flexibility and would proudly demonstrate his ‘party-pieces’ – an enviable high-kick and his other balletic move, bending forwards to touch his toes while trying to keep his knees straight. Though in both cases, his knees would stubbornly give in at the last minute! Despite the odd shortcomings, Robert was, in fact, a remarkably agile and energetic mover if not a particularly graceful one. His height, bulk and gangly limbs inevitably meant movement looked awkward.

In his later years, Robert had a recurring fear of becoming inactive and invisible, which he likened to ‘sitting in a chimney corner’. To avoid this horror, I believe he determinedly set out to grab hold of the carefree youth he’d been denied. He wrote:

[D]o you realize that I had absolutely no adolescent fun ever? I went straight from school into the Army, after living a very cloistered existence at home (which was wholly Victorian) and when the War ended I was already married and with a child.⁶

Robert embraced the idea of being emotionally and physically liberated by dance, whether he was dancing himself, as in his defiant lines from ‘How It Started’ –

Where, acting as an honorary teen-ager,
I kicked off both my shoes.

– or simply being a spectator. ‘[Y]our father & I’, he wrote ‘used to watch the Diaghileff Ballet as “Rovers” in the Coliseum before you were even predicted; & Ballet is in my blood.’⁷

And ballet, it turned out, was in the blood of two of his children

as well. His daughter Jenny, from his first marriage to Nancy, and Lucia, from his second marriage to Beryl, both underwent early ballet training and both played influential roles in Robert's blossoming theatrical leanings in the 1950s.

Jenny moved from studying ballet to performing in a musical and then a straight play, amassing along the way a cluster of influential friends in film and theatre. Some were her own, others were passed to her by Robert. So when her fledgling performing career faltered, she began working as an unofficial agent for her father, endeavouring to set up opportunities in the theatre and film world and connecting him to a network of producers, actors and choreographers, boosting interest both in Robert and his work.

Lucia proved directly inspirational. In the mid 1950s, after watching her and two of her friends perform in a school performance at Palma's Teatro Lírico, Robert dedicated a poem to them:

TO MAGDALENA MULET, MARGITA MORA & LUCIA
GRAVES

Fairies of the leaves and rain,
One from England, two from Spain,
You who flutter, as a rule,
At Aina Jansons' Ballet School,
O what joy to see you go
Dancing at the **Lírico**:
Pirouetting, swaying, leaping,
Twirling, whirling, softly creeping,
To a most exciting din
Of French horn and violin!

These three bouquets which I send you
Show how highly I commend you,
And not only praise the bright
Brisk performance of tonight
(Like the audience), but far more
The practising that went before.
You have triumphed at the cost

Of week-ends in the country lost,
 Aching toes from brand-new points,
 Aching muscles, aching joints,
 Pictures missed and parties too,
 And suppers getting cold for you
 With homework propped beside the plate,
 Which meant you had to sit up late.
 From dawn to midnight fairies run
 To please both Aina and the Nun.

In the poem Robert, ever observant, creates an evocative and remarkably accurate picture of a young dance student's life. He depicts the physical and social sacrifices she makes for her art and her conflicting need to please both dance teacher and school teacher (in this case a Catholic nun). He describes the transformation process from young child imitating butterfly moves – ‘You who flutter as a rule / At Aina Jansons' Ballet School’ – into committed senior student performing a series of complex moves on a proper stage – ‘Pirouetting, swaying, leaping, / Twirling, whirling, softly creeping’.

Robert starts the list of dance moves with ‘Pirouetting’, a derivation of the French word for spinning top and very much a part of a dancer's vocabulary. He then immediately steps ‘off stage’, as it were, and reverts to his own poetic vocabulary, ‘swaying, leaping, twirling, whirling, softly creeping’. In general ballet terms, the moves could be divided into two distinct groups: the *Pyrotechnics* – pirouetting, leaping, twirling, whirling – and the *Lyrical* – swaying, softly creeping. In choreographic terms, if the sequence of moves is interpreted as continuous, the order of them in the poem is generally credible, save, perhaps, the last. It would be easy to finish a *pirouette*, execute a series of choreographed *ports de bras* (swaying arm movements), take a preparation and run into a *grand jeté* (big leap), cut into another quick preparation and perform a series of Dervish-like turns (whirls) into a series of *chênes* (twirls), but from there it would be awkward and probably comical to ‘softly creep’. In poetic terms, of course, there are other criteria at play. The ‘choreography’ or

deliberate positioning of words has to do with connecting rhythm and rhyme and overall imagery. It is making its own music, whereas dance choreography, in general, is driven by an existing score.

In a later poem, ‘*Casse-Noisette*’, sent to me in 1971, Robert uses another ballet stage in another setting. At the time, I was a young corps de ballet dancer with the London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet) and churning out two exhausting performances a day of the *Nutcracker* as part of our annual Christmas season at the Festival Hall in London. Born a headstrong individual with passion and theatrical temperament, I found the tightly-harnessed corps de ballet drill both frustrating and expressionless and would often vent my frustrations in letters to Robert. For me, ballet was about freeing the spirit and creating a particular kind of charged magic, something Robert was attuned to:

As a scurrying snow-flake
Or a wild-rose petal
Carried by the breeze,
Dance your nightly ballet
On the set stage.

And although each scurrying
Snow-flake or rose-petal
Resembles any other –
Her established smile,
Her well-schooled carriage –

Dance to Rule, ballet-child;
Yet never laugh to Rule,
Never love to Rule!
Keep your genius hidden
By a slow rage.

So let it be your triumph
In this nightly ballet
Of snow-flakes and petals,

To present love-magic
In your single image –
With a low, final curtsey
From the set stage.

In this poem, Robert again combines ‘onstage’ and ‘offstage’ imagery to his advantage. He accurately depicts the stagecraft and rigid discipline demanded of a young corps de ballet dancer in performance and the de-personalising of her as she seamlessly moulds into a collective whole with her fellow corps dancers. Then later, he steps ‘offstage’ with a warning about the need to keep one’s personal magic and individualism when concerned with matters of the heart, ‘never laugh to Rule, / Never love to Rule!’ Advising that by doing this, the all-powerful ‘love-magic’ could be secretly conveyed ‘From the set stage’ to those able to recognise it.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Robert, ever eager to get more directly involved with dance, wrote two ballet synopses. The first, *Cophetua and the Beggar-Maid*, was loosely based on the medieval romance which tells the legend of an African king who, having failed to find love within his court, one day finds himself instantly smitten by the beauty of a penniless beggar whom he spots in the streets below his palace window. He attracts her attention by throwing gold coins out on to the street, and when she looks up, tells her she is to be his wife – to which she consents. One ending to the legend relates how the two live a quiet existence, are much loved by their people, eventually die and are buried together. Robert though, inclines towards a more dramatic theme. His treatment for the ballet scenario includes multifaceted intrigues, a murder and suicide and a beggar maid who, to escape her own impending death at the hands of her husband’s loyal bodyguard, has to invoke the powers of the moon to create a magical darkness under which she can run away in the form of a hare!

In his correspondence, Robert was clearly uncertain as to which

of the two protagonists should be named first in the title. On a typed but undated manuscript of the ballet scenario which he gave me, it is Cophetua. However, for his poem 'The Beggar Maid and King Cophetua', written around the same period, Robert reverses the title names. This was perhaps to accommodate his recurring 'muse theme' within the poem, where the muse/beggar maid drives the action, betraying her poet/king and forsaking her gilded trappings by eloping with a lowly character and returning to a life of poverty, her poetic magic challenged:

To be adored by a proud Paladin
Whom the wide world adored,
To queen it over countless noblewomen:
What fame was hers at last,
What lure and envy!

Yet, being still a daughter of the mandrake
She sighed for more than fame;
Not all the gold with which Cophetua crowned her
Could check this beggar-maid's
Concupiscence.

Sworn to become proverbially known
As martyred by true love,
She took revenge on his victorious name
That blotted her own fame
For woman's magic.

True to her kind, she slipped away one dawn
With a poor stable lad,
Gaunt, spotted, drunken, scrawny, desperate,
Mean of intelligence
As bare of honour.

So pitiable indeed that when the guards
Who caught them saw the green
Stain on her finger from his plain brass ring
They gaped at it, too moved

Not to applaud her.

The rags-to-riches theme of the Cophetua legend has inspired numerous poets, writers and artists over the centuries. Shakespeare, for example, refers to the legend in four of his plays written in the 1590s: *Love's Labour's Lost* (IV. 1. 1034), *Romeo and Juliet* (II. 1. 805), *Richard II* (V. 3. 80) and *Henry IV Part II* (V. 3. 3510). In 1765 an anonymous ballad, 'King Cophetua and the Beggar-Maid', appeared in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Tennyson published a two-stanza poem, 'The Beggar Maid', in 1842, which became the inspiration for Edward Burne-Jones's painting 'King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid' in 1884, and in 1898 Leighton painted his own version, 'The King and the Beggar-Maid'. A still later exponent of the enduring theme was Robert's close friend and fellow poet James Reeves. His poem 'Cophetua' formed the first section of a collection of short poems under the heading 'Letter Before A Journey' which appeared in his 1958 book, *The Talking Skull* and later in his *Collected Poems 1929–1959*, published in 1960.

Robert's frustrated efforts to get his "Cophetua Ballet" into production lasted several years. In its early stages he clearly had Jerome Robbins in mind for choreographer but this, it seems, was not to be.

It occurs to me that you might know someone who would like the *Beggarmaid and Cophetua* ballet. Jerome Robbins is having a nervous breakdown, so he's no use. What about Gillian Lynne?⁸

The music for the ballet was being composed by Robert's then son-in-law, Ramon Farran.

I'm sure Ramon will finish the ballet music when he comes at Christmas, but I can't count on Jerry Robbins, of course. I don't know *how* the news of his taking part got into the *Daily Mail*. Anyhow, I wrote to him apologizing.⁹

However, barely into the New Year, I received an update, referring to lengthy discussions with Ramon, rather than any completion of the score!

Have been [...] talking a lot with Ramon about the Cophetua Ballet. He is already started with it and we agree entirely about the sort of music needed. We both have a feeling that it's *important* and *special* [...].¹⁰

Over a year and a half later another update reveals:

Ramon has nearly finished the music for the Cophetua ballet, but not contacted Jerry Robbins who has been a) ill b) away.¹¹

The early soundings of Robert's second ballet came at the end of September 1971. My boss at London Festival Ballet, the former Royal Ballet ballerina Beryl Grey, had shown interest in the suggestion that Robert should do a ballet synopsis for the company based on historical images of London. Robert wrote,

[T]ell my friend Beryl Grey that [...] *of course* I'll do the plan for the ballet of London: I do happen to know a great deal about London [...].¹²

Further on in this letter he writes,

I have no ideas as yet, but they'll come. I should love to introduce Queen Elizabeth dancing to lute music, as on Julian Bream's record-cover of Dowland, & being tossed in the air.

In a letter four days later, Robert had indeed conjured up some very strong ideas:

Made a start with the ballet – based on the magic of the Ravens at the Tower. They have to be closely connected with the highly protected Swans on the River; historically and mythologically they are associated with the original God & Goddess of London – Bran the *Sun God* and *Bride* the Moon Goddess, – “*Swans and Ravens*” – [...] the men can dance in the opening scene as *ravens* & the girls as swans [...].¹³

Robert follows up this simple scenario with a complex mix of historically based ideas that do not easily lend themselves to choreography.

As with so many of Robert’s film and theatrical plans, neither ballet ever materialised in his lifetime. For most creative artists this might well have been a setback, but for Robert it was not. When in his late sixties and seventies, the actual involvement in and writing of a particular project, and not its outcome, was what mattered to him. Any form of participation was a welcome challenge and seemed to motivate and inspire him to continue with the poems he felt he needed to write.

Film treatments, plays, opera and ballet scenarios, all of which Robert lent his hand to, require highly specialised, individual skills. In his film and theatrical ventures Robert had detractors who perhaps felt he had not fully mastered the individual skills required for a particular task. While most of his ventures got little further than the starting block, the few high-profile ones that did reach screen and stage were adaptations of his historical novel *I, Claudius* and his short story ‘The Shout’, which were scripted by others:

1972 theatre production of *I, Claudius* – written by John Mortimer.

1976 BBC TV series *I, Claudius* – written by Jack Pulman.

1978 film *The Shout* – screenplay written by Jerzy Skolimowski and Michael Austin.

Theatre, opera, ballet and cinema are about teamwork and collective input. Scripts, librettos, scenarios and screenplays are subjected to constant manipulation by others in the creative team. Scenes get changed or dropped, new ones get included and performers eventually impose their own interpretations and nuances on the work as it gets completed. Poetry, on the other hand, is a solitary craft, where the poet keeps control of all aspects of the creative process (unless, as is often the case in Robert's love poetry, he is happy to share control with a muse).

However, unlike in other performing arts where the director is a separate figure and in overall creative charge, in ballet it is the choreographer who has control. He will often bypass the use of a third party's scenario, coming up with a concept himself, and will find the music, create the steps, make the changes and give the stage directions.

Like a poet – sifting through words and phrases, restructuring and punctuating – the choreographer evaluates the steps, gestures and emotions through his dancer(s) and reshapes and adjusts the movement until even the smallest detail makes balletic, dramatic and emotional sense. In both poetry and ballet it is essential that the protagonists involved stay open to unexpected moments of inspiration.

Robert, I would argue, had a very clear understanding of the magic of stagecraft and how to obtain it, as he demonstrates in a poem from the early 1960s, 'Dance of Words'. Here he skilfully equates the creation of a poem with that of a dance.

To make them move, you should start from lightning
And not forecast the rhythm: rely on chance,
Or so-called chance for its bright emergence
Once lightning interpenetrates the dance.

Grant them their own traditional steps and postures
But see they dance it out again and again
Until only lightning is left to puzzle over –
The choreography plain, and the theme plain.

Julia Simonne, Robert Graves's last muse, was the inspiration behind more than 250 of his poems between 1966 and 1975. She trained as a dancer at the Royal Ballet School, danced with the Royal Opera Ballet, Royal Norwegian Ballet and English National Ballet, and was Principal Dancer with the Theatre Ballet of London. She is an Associate of the Royal Academy of Dance and continues to work internationally as an independent choreographer, guest teacher and lecturer.

NOTES

¹ 2 May 1967.

² 12 November 1972.

³ 30 January 1969.

⁴ 1 January 1970.

⁵ 22 April 1967.

⁶ 5 July 1968.

⁷ 25 September 1971.

⁸ 24 December 1967. Gillian Lynne: the British dancer, choreographer and theatre director, widely known today for her work on *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

⁹ 25 November 1969.

¹⁰ 4 January 1970.

¹¹ 25 September 1971.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 29 September 1971.