

Robert Graves's Favourite Poem? The One that Saved his Life

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Abstract: This essay is a bio-critical analysis of Robert Graves's sonnet, 'The Troll's Nosegay', paying particular attention to Graves's urgency in writing the poem while he was sick with Spanish flu.

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Along with a great many people around the world, in March 2020 I was struck down with the Coronavirus and was forced to spend a number of days quarantined in a spare room until the illness ran its course. While unwell, I was buoyed by kind messages from family and friends, including a get-well email from Lucia Graves, Robert's daughter, with 'The Troll's Nosegay' attached for me to read. She said how she often thought of this poem during the dark and disconcerting days of the current pandemic, and of how she owed her very existence to it.

Robert had written the poem in March 1919, exactly a hundred and one years ago, while he was fighting for his life against Spanish flu. Indeed, he had written it on his sickbed just a few hundred yards away from where I was reading it during my own struggle with a global virus. He later said that a determination to get the poem right – he took it through thirty-five drafts before he was satisfied – was what kept him from succumbing to the illness that for him had developed into a dangerous case of septic pneumonia. He was twenty-three years old.

The Spanish flu took hold in the final months of the First World War and quickly spread around the globe, infecting roughly a third of the human population. It proved to be more deadly even than

the war, with some fifty million dying from the disease compared to ten million killed in the war. Despite its name, the disease did not originate in Spain, where in its early stages it was nicknamed 'the soldier from Naples', after a popular music hall hit at the time that was also very catchy.

Robert initially developed symptoms while he was stationed with his regiment at Limerick. He was a captain with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and had been so badly wounded at the Somme that he was initially left for dead in a corner of a field dressing station. His main injury was caused by a piece of shell that hit him in the chest, leaving him with a damaged lung that made him particularly susceptible to the pneumonia that was a common complication of the Spanish flu. Feeling unwell and desperate to get home, he managed to secure his demobilization by rather recklessly by-passing the official channels, and he set off across the Irish Sea to join his wife Nancy and their baby daughter Jenny who were in Hove.

Robert and Nancy Nicholson had married just over a year before, in January 1918, at St James's Church in Piccadilly. George Mallory, the mountaineer who later died on Mt Everest, was best man and other guests included his fellow soldier poet Wilfred Owen. Nancy's father was William Nicholson and her brother Ben Nicholson, two highly successful and renowned artists. Nancy served as a Land Girl during the war and was herself a superb illustrator. One idea she and Robert had for making money was for her to illustrate some of Robert's poems. This produced a series of whimsical and witty poems from Robert which were strikingly visual and evocative of themes such as innocence and love in a pastoral setting – the diametric opposite of the poems about his experience in the trenches, which he was now trying desperately to leave behind him.

In their definitive edition of Graves's poems, Dunstan Ward and Beryl Graves (Robert's second wife) tell us that one such poem, 'Love Without Hope', was inspired by a sketch by William Nicholson which he sent to them as an idea, being 'just the thing' for a Robert poem illustrated by Nancy. Nicholson's sketch showed a portly but audacious bird-catcher lifting his hat to a beautiful lady ('the Squire's own daughter') who wears a flowing dress and

carries a parasol. As the bird-catcher bows to doff his top hat, larks 'escape' from beneath it and fly singing around the startled woman's head.¹ 'The Troll's Nosegay' would seem to be another such poem on a similar theme, though the troll came first, pre-dating the bird-catcher by some two years. A capricious lady is courted by an audacious troll who, although ridiculous in his presumption, startles the object of his devotion by conjuring up a bouquet of summer flowers in the depths of winter.

In January 1919, Robert and Nancy had yet to set up permanent home together. William Nicholson offered to rent a house for them in Hove so that their baby would come into a world of healthy fresh air. He himself had a house and studio at the other end of Brighton beach next to where Rudyard Kipling had lived until 1902. The house he rented for them was 11 Seaside Villas on Western Esplanade, one of an exclusive row of eleven newly-built houses next to Hove Lagoon. Eight years later, fellow Royal Welch Fusilier poet and artist David Jones was to spend the summer at number 5, where, thanks to the remarkable light and the continuous influence of the sea, he felt he had produced some of his best paintings.² In more recent years this short row of houses has been home for a number of musicians, writers and celebrities, including Adele, Fat Boy Slim, Zoe Ball, David Walliams and Heather Mills, wife of Paul McCartney. The houses come with their own stretch of private beach, which in January would have provided a bracing environment for Robert and his family, with a reliably strong wind blowing off the English Channel and waves pounding the shingle outside their windows.

Nicholson's hope for a healthy environment for the baby ended abruptly when she was four weeks old and her father arrived home, seriously unwell and highly infectious. When Robert entered the house, the first thing he saw was the ghost of Nancy's mother, who had died of Spanish flu a few months earlier. He was already delirious. Nancy soon started to feel unwell, and the rest of the household also went down, including an aunt and a family friend. Fortunately, Jenny and her grandfather were not affected.

Finding medical help in the pandemic was difficult but Nicholson managed to engage two ex-nurses to help look after those who were unwell. One was competent but frequently drunk, the other was incompetent but at least sober and would irritate them all by standing at the window, spreading her arms and declaiming: 'Sea, sea, give my husband back to me.' Apparently her husband was not drowned but unfaithful.³

A doctor visited and told Robert that pneumonia in both lungs had developed into sepsis and his chances of recovery were low. Robert was however determined to survive and put all his energy and concentration into writing and perfecting 'The Troll's Nosegay'.

The poem presents a comic scene with vivid economy. A troll is in love with a lady who wants a bouquet of flowers, even though it is winter. If he really loved her, he would find her flowers somewhere. She begins to cry which the troll finds intolerable, and he swears to give her all the flowers she could ever want, enough to satisfy even 'a China Queen'. Trolls at that time were rare creatures in English literature and this poem is one of the first sightings of the mythical creature in British poetry. Robert would have come across trolls primarily in the Brothers Grimm story of 'Three Billy Goats Gruff' and a number of Hans Christian Andersen's stories, notably 'The Ice Queen' and 'The Travelling Companion', in which a troll bewitches a beautiful and capricious princess who sets impossible challenges for her suitors.

There are many types of troll in Scandinavian legend, from giant, violent ogres to dwarfish woodland spirits who are spiteful, mischievous, ugly, and good at magic (in some stories, 'troll' is translated as magician).⁴ Robert's troll is of the latter kind and derives from the Andersen stories, but I also suspect that the idea of the ungainly but presumptuous troll courting the beautiful, unattainable lady may owe its provenance to a set of famous troll illustrations by the Swedish painter John Bauer, who had died in 1918. One of Bauer's most famous troll pictures, published in 1913, shows a beautiful fair maiden with golden hair and a flowing white dress, with two small, comically misshapen, grotesque, slouching

trolls. Bauer's extraordinary success with these illustrations may well have given Robert the idea of a poem for illustration by Nancy that might have a similar popular appeal.

The troll in the poem uses his magical powers to conjure up an impressive bouquet. Robert and his contemporary readers would have been familiar with the 'language of flowers' which was such a part of Victorian and Edwardian popular culture, in which a bouquet would convey a number of coded messages. In *The Language and Poetry of Flowers*, one of the most popular 'flower dictionaries' of the time, the 'intelligent reader' is promised that 'under the guidance of this little volume, many a bright nosegay may exchange hands, and tell, in its fitting and intelligible language, a welcome message to a fair lady's ear'.⁵ The troll's nosegay contains lilies for pureness, roses for love and mignonettes for 'your qualities surpass your charms'. A conventional message on the face of it, but these flowers are not what they seem. The white lily is only 'drawn' and not with a pencil but with a cold and misty fog. The rose is pale rather than red and formed of 'mist-magic'. The mignonette is 'elvish' and 'unsubstantial'. Along with other 'vague' blooms conjured from 'wandering dreams', these flowers are set not in a vase but a cauldron, which suggests witchcraft. The troll's flowers are remarkable not for their beauty but for their coldness, paleness and illusory nature. The message hidden in the troll's nosegay is not to be trusted.

The lady takes her nosegay and she is again moved to tears but this time she cries because she is so charmed by the magnificence of the gesture and confused by the magical appearance of such wonderful blossoms. Then the last line turns from gratitude to petulance. Like the princess in Hans Christian Andersen, she had set her suitor an impossible challenge, expecting him to fail and be found wanting. When he surprised her by succeeding in his task, this turned out to be really rather annoying.

Robert's biographer Richard Perceval Graves suggests that 'The Troll's Nosegay' is an early hint of trouble to come in Robert's marriage to Nancy. She apparently had a 'strongly capricious streak' but Robert was so much in love that for a while at least he

responded lovingly to her whims.⁶ The critic Peter Sanders has seen in the poem evidence of 'a curious ambivalence' in Graves's attitude toward love, 'a reluctance to give himself up to love entirely'.⁷ Others may find in the poem a harbinger of another relationship that was to obsess Robert in later years, that between a poet and his muse, in which with 'a boy's presumption' he sought 'to court the queen in her high silk pavilion' ('The Face in the Mirror') by conjuring up a world made of words.

'The Troll's Nosegay' was for Robert a rare experiment with the sonnet. There are fourteen decasyllabic lines, but they do not resemble any of the more common sonnet rhyme schemes. The first two quatrains follow the English or Shakespearean rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD. The first quatrain sets the test of love: the lady demands a nosegay of summer flowers in winter as proof of love. The second is the acceptance of challenge. This is followed by a sestet with an unorthodox rhyme scheme, EFFEFE, which suggests trollish confusion and disruption. Here the troll meets the test but the lady is not wholly won, for she is both charmed and piqued by his success.

Each section marks a twist and a turn in the tussle between the presumptuous suitor and the capricious lady. The opening line sets the tone of cut and thrust with a demand, an exclamation, a hard caesura, and then a question: 'A simple nosegay! Was that much to ask?'. The poem does not end with the rhyming couplet expected in an English Sonnet, which would bring resolution to the affair or point to triumph for one or other of the adversaries. Instead the penultimate line steps gradually down the page, breaking into five separate lines, drawing out the sense of exasperation at such capriciousness, leading into the final line where the rhyme scheme is turned back on itself. No one wins this particular courtship contest, it's a draw.

Robert Graves was rather ruthless in omitting his early poems from later collections of his poetry. 'The Troll's Nosegay' is however one of the relatively few survivors of 1919 to make it all the way through to his *Collected Poems 1975*. Whether this is because he truly thought it to be one of his best poems, or because

he had a sentimental attachment to the poem that had saved his life, we do not know. He does though give a clue in a letter written in 1962 in response to an invitation to choose an overall favourite from among his many poems for inclusion in an anthology, *Poet's Choice*, edited by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland.⁸ He chose 'The Troll's Nosegay' and explained how he had written it when he had Spanish flu:

My temperature rose to 105, and both lungs were affected. The over-worked doctor said I had no chance, the household wept openly, but one thing kept me alive: the obstinate intention of getting my poem right. It had already gone into several drafts, and I wasn't going to be beaten by it. The technical problem was how to make a sonnet read as though it were not a sonnet, while keeping the rules. By the thirty-fifth draft I had all but solved this, and was tottering about on a stick. "The Troll's Nosegay" saved my life, and I'm grateful. It has since gone into a thirty-sixth, perhaps semifinal, draft. No poem is ever perfected'.⁹

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NOTES

¹ Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), I, pp. 402-03.

² Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), chapter 7.

³ Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (London: Cape, 1929), p. 350.

⁴ For a full survey of trolls in literature and art see John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London: Reaktion, 2014).

⁵ *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* (New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1857), p. iv.

⁶ Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895-1926* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 208.

⁷ Peter L. Sanders, 'Robert Graves – A Poet's Quest for Meaning', *The English Journal*, 59 (January 1970), 24.

⁸ *The Poet's Choice*, ed. by Paul England and Joseph Langland (New York: Time, 1966).

⁹ *Complete Poems*, I, pp. 364-65.