

## **Interview with Vivian Holzer Rozental**

### *The Robert Graves Oral History Project*

**Abstract:** Robert Graves Oral History Project interview with Vivian Holzer Rozental, 14 February 2023. The following is not a transcript of the interview, but a long excerpt that has been revised and edited for publication in *The Robert Graves Review*. All quotations from an earlier article by Vivian Holzer Rozental derive from an earlier volume of this journal (4.2), and all silent citations are to that article.<sup>1</sup> Questions prepared by Carl Hahn and Michael Joseph; primary interviewer, Joseph.

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Michael Joseph: How were the poets chosen for The Symposium?<sup>2</sup> How was, how is Robert chosen, for example.

Vivian Holzer Rozental: To tell you the truth, I don't know. I arrived in Mexico after university. There was a cultural Olympics parallel to the sport Olympics, which I found out about through one of my professors at Bryn Mawr College, I made an appointment with the head of the cultural Olympics. The planning for the Symposium was already in progress., but I had been away from Mexico for three years, so I was given the list of poets to be invited. Do you want the list?

Michael: We'd love the list.

Vivian: It was Robert Graves, Yevtushenko, Ungaretti, Neruda, René Char, Sédar Senghor, Octavio Paz, Odysseas Elytis, Robert Lowell, Stephen Spender, and Nicolás Guillén.<sup>3</sup>

Michael: That's quite an all-star team.

Vivian: When I arrived at the Olympic Committee, Yevtushenko had come to Mexico about one week before; so that was already on course.

Carl Hahn: You wrote that you were curious to see whether Robert's [poem], 'Torch and Crown' would provoke the public in a way Yevtushenko's poem had done. Can you recall what the public reception was?

Vivian: There was such euphoria at the time with the hosting of the Olympics, and with Enriqueta Basilio,<sup>4</sup> that there were no comments: it was just applause and happiness. I come back to the first question you asked. Why or how the poets were chosen. There are two parts to this question. On the one hand, every country participating in the Olympics was invited to send a poem on the Olympics. and those were going to be put into an anthology. Those authors were not included as part of the Symposium. The eleven poets I mentioned as special guests for the event in Mexico City: that was something separate and special.

Carl: Were the poems published in a single gathering?

Vivian: No. The Symposium was eventually cancelled because the Government was afraid that one of the poets could be chosen as a symbol of the student unrest that was taking place in Mexico.

Michael: And we have more questions about the turbulence and how that happens. We loved being able to publish that in the journal. How did you convince the officer at the airport that Robert, who, I think had forgotten to bring his visa, was a special guest of the Mexican Government?

Vivian: At the time it was very easy. I flashed my identification card as an official of the Organizing Committee and explained that he was a guest of the Government. I wasn't questioned further. I had access to the inside of the airport and went up to the door as he came out of the plane. Today, you can't do that! In 1968 we still

had certain privileges. This was an official visitor, so it was not difficult.

Michael: You write that Robert had accepted the invitation to the Olympics as a pretext for coming to Mexico, but his real purpose was to join James Metcalf and Pilar Pellicer to ingest psychotropic mushrooms.<sup>5</sup> Do you know if he pursued the mushroom experiment while he was in Mexico?

Vivian: He didn't. I didn't let him because he had to be at the opening of the Games. He came a whole week before the event, so had I let him go, who knows if he would have come back! He was not interested in the Olympics at all!

Michael: How did you and Robert establish the routine? Would you pick him up at the hotel every morning after breakfast. Why do you think he didn't slip away?

Vivian: I was holding him hostage.

Michael: But how did you do that? He was a very wilful character.

Vivian: Yes, but he acceded. I told him the whole background to the Symposium, and I think that helped break the ice. Robert was very concerned about politics and about what was going on in the world, but he didn't know the details of what was happening in Mexico. There was a lot of censorship, so I just found out through word of mouth and by being there. The cancellation of the Symposium was quite sudden, but Robert was already in the country and decided to help me. That's why he called me his associate.

Michael: The gravity of the situation drew him in?

Vivian: Exactly.

Michael: You wrote that walking among the pyramids of Teotihuacan, Robert presented 'the most dynamic combination of

simultaneous thought and action in a single stroke'. It must have been unforgettable.

Vivian: Yes, he was very strong, physically and mentally. There I was, having had a classical education, I followed pretty well but to tell you the truth I didn't understand half of what he was saying. Also, he spoke in a very low voice, so sometimes I couldn't hear or didn't know many of the names he quoted because he was ... you could call him a name-dropper of Greek gods.

Michael: As if they were friends of his?

Vivian: Exactly.

Michael: How did the owl exactly figure in the long-term relationship? Did Robert identify himself as an owl, or with the owl? Or was it the trademark of your friendship? Kind of a seal of your bond?

Vivian: I think it was both. Because I mentioned the owl as a symbol of Bryn Mawr College, he brought up his poems about the owl. He had a magazine called *The Owl*.<sup>6</sup> Then I gave him some figurines of owls. He in turn gave them to some friends of his in Mallorca.

Michael: Jumping around again. Do you happen to remember what sort of questions Robert asked your father about the timing mechanisms? You write that during your family lunch, this was a topic of conversation.

Vivian: He didn't ask many questions, he just listened, because my father was talking about it. Omega made the first electronic scoreboards to be used at the Olympic games. Today, it's no longer a novelty, but back then my father was very proud of it, and of being able to deal with the problems of importing things from a communist country (like Hungary) at the time. We were a few days away from the Olympics and there still were parts missing. So, my

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father was talking a lot, explaining all these things, and Robert just sat and listened.

Michael: It's interesting to hear Robert say, 'I'm an Omega man', because one of Robert's famous quirks was his indisposition toward watches.

Vivian: I know, and he mentions that in one of his letters. Nonetheless, he was very pleased with the watch he got from my father. He spoke about it in many of his letters. But at the end of one of them he said, 'I never really liked watches'. However, he did like this particular Omega watch because it reminded him, I suppose, of me, of my parents and of his Olympic adventure.

Michael: Were any other poets present at the Olympics?

Vivian: There were no other poets. He was the representative poet.

Michael: That kind of attention doesn't usually fall to a poet in his seventies. The spotlight tends to turn away. So that must have been nice for him.

Vivian: He was not an epic poet; he was a love poet in the tradition of the Latin love poets. He was not patriotic. He didn't have patriotic verses like Yevtushenko. So that is the difference between them.

Michael: You don't tend to get very much attention when you're writing about your own ideas about love, unless you're writing for the soap operas which he wasn't.

Vivian: Or you're the object, the person, the muse.

Michael: We asked about your father; now I want to ask about your mother. In the excerpt of your memoir that we published, there's a lovely photograph of you and Robert and your mother in Deià. Do you happen to remember what your mother's impression of Robert was?

Vivian: I never discussed it with her. He was just part of my life at the time, and she was not involved in the conversation. My mother was a very sweet person and Robert liked her a lot. Whenever he could, he sat her next to him at the Games.

Michael: She wasn't curious about him and his many possessions, his manner, his friendships, even when she visited in Mallorca?

Vivian: He did not involve her. It was a trip my parents had planned to celebrate their wedding anniversary and I went along. Robert invited us to his house to reciprocate all the hospitality he had received in Mexico. Also, because of my friendship with him, he included them. During our visit to his home, at one point he took me aside, asked me to go for a walk with him and took me to a small cottage where he kept all his possessions and treasures. My parents stayed with Beryl and didn't come along for this.

Carl: You also wrote that writing outdoors was 'therapeutic' for Robert. Did you have the sense he needed therapy? Are you referring to the PTSD he took home from the First World War, and in some senses never left him?

Vivian: Not at all. What he liked was to be outdoors because he liked nature. He liked plants and not being confined to a closed room.

Carl: So, it's a general sort of a therapy. One feels better being outdoors, in nature?

Vivian: Exactly. As far as his war experience goes, I don't think he was thinking about therapy at that point. He had had therapy after the war but didn't mention any of this to me.

Carl: Robert's meeting with Dr George Rosenkranz, a Hungarian organic chemist who worked with yams, and a nascent birth control pill, sounds very exciting.<sup>7</sup>

Vivian: George was a very close friend of my family. He lived across the street from us, and I grew up with his children. We were always coming and going from one house to the other. As we were so close, I just rang up, told George that Robert Graves was visiting and asked whether we could come over? That encounter was very interesting for Robert, because he was into plants, nature and mushrooms so when George began talking about yams and his use of *barbasco* to make contraceptive pills, Graves was fascinated. On the other hand, Robert was also interested in women. He believed in the White Goddess, a primeval goddess to whom he devoted his poetry. It's true that he had a muse, and the muse was inspirational, but the poems were given to the White Goddess. So now, all of a sudden, he gets into the Rosenkranz ambiance, with yams and contraceptive pills, and being able to control maternity. With the pill women acquired the power to control having children. The advance was enormous if you compared it to the previous century. So, for him, this was all very revealing.

Michael: You wrote that a special empathy developed between you and Robert. And you write elsewhere: 'I had become a friend, although I later heard that he often discussed these subjects with other close friends as his way of making them feel close to him. I was young, innocent, and extremely flattered to be allowed to share his world. Imagine my surprise when one day I received a short note saying he loved me, and that I so much resembled Juli in essence.'<sup>8</sup> So, were you a little bit in love, do you think?

Vivian: No, no, I took my work very seriously. It was my first job, and I couldn't let other things interfere, especially given the difficult circumstances. I was intimidated by Robert at the beginning, but later, I felt more at ease. When I began sharing with him the problems that I was encountering, we became friends. He may have had another idea in mind – he was a ladies' man after all....

Michael: In a nice sense, a ladies' man.

Vivian: ... And he counted on many muses, but I don't think I was a muse, because he always referred to Juli.

Michael: Once this Symposium was cancelled, you took it upon yourself to keep Robert busy. But why was that something that you had to do? Why didn't one of the Olympic organizers step in at this point and relieve the burden from the shoulders of a twenty-year-old college student?

Vivian: Power is treacherous. The President had decided arbitrarily to cancel the Poetry Symposium. People underneath him could not go against his will. On the other hand, I was still officially in charge of a Symposium that was no longer a Symposium. The Olympic organizers found it convenient to delegate to me the responsibility of handling the outcome of the cancellation. I felt embarrassed by the situation. It was not serious. Not being sure of what steps to take, I went to consult my ex-philosophy professor from the Lycée, Ramón Xirau,<sup>9</sup> to ask him what to do.

Michael: I don't remember if you mentioned whether Robert met Ramón Xirau.

Vivian: Ramón introduced me to the main representatives of the Mexican Intelligentsia who were foreign to me since I had left Mexico just after school. They, graciously, organized some event: a lunch, a dinner, a conference. Robert met Ramon in one of these gatherings.

Michael: Speaking of these other people, you mention a number of interesting characters. Jorge Luis Morales, from Puerto Rico, Franklin Morales from the Dominican Republic, Miguel Gomez Checa from Peru. Do you remember anything about Robert's interactions with them, or how they related to each other?

Vivian: These were poets who came to my office, bringing texts they wanted to have included in the poetry anthology to accompany the Symposium. They belonged to a minor category of poets who



had not been part of the prospective guest list for the Symposium. Since the renowned international poets would no longer be coming to Mexico, and since I needed to keep Robert busy, I asked them to participate in events that came up sporadically in different parts of town. They were asked to join us in excursions, meetings and selected readings. Robert exchanged a few words with them, but it did not go further.

Michael: You mentioned Octavio Paz. Did Paz and Graves meet during the visit, and did they get along?

Vivian: Octavio Paz was ambassador of Mexico to India at that time. Octavio had no intention of coming back to Mexico for the Olympics, nor of writing a poem for the occasion. However, given the Tlatelolco massacre, he decided to renounce his Ambassadorial position and felt inspired to write a very critical poem of the government, which appeared in *Siempre*, the most important literary review in Mexico. Octavio was therefore not in the city at the time and Graves never met him.

Paz eventually received the Nobel Prize for literature in Sweden, many years after the Olympics. My husband and I accompanied him to the ceremony. We had just returned to Mexico after serving as Ambassadors to Sweden and Octavio asked us to accompany him for the grand occasion.

Michael: Do you think Robert would have articulated a less confrontational message than Paz? One more sympathetic to young people and less angrily directed against the authorities?

Vivian: Robert did not want to get politically involved. He was quite aware that he could not come as a guest to a foreign country and confront it with his own personal criticism. He was rather the participant observer.

Michael: He had a lifetime of being a participant observer living in Mallorca. Even living in England after the War, I think he was an observer.

Vivian: That is true. He lived in Mallorca after the War, and during the Spanish Civil War. He then went back to England when the *Franquistas* took over Spain.<sup>10</sup>

Carl: I'd like to ask a bibliographic question if I may. To what does the "Poetry Symposium *program*" refer? Was there one program or a series? Was it ever published? Do you still have the printed anthology?

Vivian: No, we never printed the anthology. I had gathered the poems that every participating country had sent, but given the cancelation of the poetry event, the anthology was forgotten. I had devised a specific program for Robert: lectures in different places, poetry readings and meetings with Mexican intellectuals. These events had been organized in the last moment with the help of Ramon Xirau. I also took advantage of programs organized in parallel through the Olympic Committee e.g. a program of the UN for Young people in the outskirts of Mexico City. I took Robert there in order for him to establish a dialogue with the people participating in the camp. Other events included a cocktail at the Spanish Embassy and at the British Council where he was able to meet with a broader range of people.

Michael: Okay. So those are the readings. Yes, you set up one at Oaxtepec; and one at the Palace.<sup>11</sup> You also mentioned readings by Octavio Amórtegui at the *Club de Periodistas*.<sup>12</sup>

Vivian: I took advantage of the presence of the other poets and included them in the 'outings' although they did not have an active participation. That was plan B.

Michael: Did he meet Bobi Jones?<sup>13</sup>

Vivian: Bobi Jones got food poisoning on the very first night when he arrived in Mexico City. Robert did meet him briefly at a cocktail party, but he did not engage into a long conversation because Bobi Jones had to be taken straight to the hospital.

Michael: It sounds as if Robert's visit helped to broaden your circle of literary friends and acquaintances in Mexico City.

Vivian: Absolutely.

Michael: Did any of those people ever talk about Robert later?

Vivian: Ramon Xirau was a good friend. I kept seeing him after the Olympics and we often talked about Robert. The other people involved remembered Robert but did not keep up with the newly acquired friendship. Robert was very disappointed because he had considered them as friends and yet they never wrote to him. He mentions this in his letters to me. He had wonderful recollections and always inquired about his Mexican 'friends'. He would have expected some reciprocity.

Michael: And he was a big letter writer, as we know. In the Robert Graves correspondence database, I think we have some 9,000 letters from him.<sup>14</sup>

Vivian: I think more. That is what I was told at the Robert Graves Society at St John's College in Oxford University. I went there in June 2022 to donate a collection of Robert's letters to me from the time of the Olympics until his death. I was welcomed in a beautiful room covered with photographs of Robert on the walls. There was a big table in the middle with folders containing letters to Robert from a series of important writers and artists: Agatha Christie, Picasso, Stephen Hawking. I leafed through them and suddenly I came upon a folder with my own letters. Professor Salah Omri, who heads the department,<sup>15</sup> explained that my donation represented the first complete set of letters from both the receiver and from the writer. It was therefore an exciting moment for them and certainly for me. They were very, very welcoming and charming.

Michael: I'm so happy to know that.

Vivian: There is a second project too: a friend of ours, Alan Riding,<sup>16</sup> a former correspondent for *The New York Times* in Mexico City, had a particular interest in Robert Graves. He was intrigued to hear that Robert's first muse, Laura Riding, carried his own family name. People had often asked whether he was related to Laura Riding. He heard I was writing a memoir on Graves and the Olympics, asked me to send him a copy and turned it into a play. The play does not mention the Olympics. It has three characters: me as a twenty-year old, me today, and the poet. No names mentioned. And it all happens in an island. The Robert Graves Foundation now wants to present this play.

Michael: This is a kind of a lit crit question. Recently there has been a lot of critical activity around eco-criticism. So of course, we'd be curious to know if you can recall any comments Robert might have made about that presentation: the Environment and its Relevance to Poetry.

Vivian: The environment and the out of doors were important for him. They were one of his main topics of conversation. Growing plants and flowers constituted a great part of his everyday life. He did not attend the presentation you refer to because he had not yet arrived in Mexico when it took place. He would have certainly advocated for the correlation between poetry and nature because they were interconnected for him. He may not have referred to the eco-system in today's terms. However, poetry sprouted from his closeness to nature. He derived energy from nature, and it allowed him to think. It was 'magic' for him. He spoke at length about the crab apples in his garden and about making jam with one hand while writing a poem with the other. That was his method of work.

Michael: Did you feel that public opinion was turning against the Symposium poets because of political unrest? In the USA at that time there emerged a sharp division between those writers who spoke out against the American involvement in the Vietnam War and those who were silent on the question.<sup>17</sup> And the silent ones

were condemned as being elitist, or reactionary poets, old-fashioned, obsolete, which in retrospect, seems simplistic to us, but at the time, seemed very important. So, was there a sense, as the political turmoil began to percolate, as the tumult grew, that the people were turning against the poets? Now I know most of them didn't show up, but the ones who were still active; was there a sense of disgruntlement that they were just being poets and not throwing themselves into the political fray?

Vivian: Since the Symposium did not take place, there was not much for public opinion to laud or to turn against. That was the president's intention in cancelling the Symposium. Some people complained that the poets who did come did not espouse the patriotic ideals Yevtushenko had decried. But there was not much comment otherwise. The political unrest had been muted in this front.

Michael: They flew under the radar because there wasn't the Symposium as a target for their frustrations.

Vivian: There was no response to their frustrations and there was nobody to answer to the annoyance the students felt. They opposed the Olympics because of the tremendous cost they incurred. Students wanted improvements at the university and greater support from the government. This was a common cause with the student unrest all over the world in 1968. But once the Games started, people fell under a spell and left their anger behind.

Michael: We see the same problems with the World Cup as with the Olympics. They go to countries where they have a lot of space, which means they're underdeveloped, and money is poured into developing stadiums and putting on a great show while the poor and homeless are ignored.

Vivian: Money was put into infrastructure for the Olympics when it was needed elsewhere for other causes. Octavio's poem made a big

noise because it unveiled the lack of government interest in the common cause and in its dreadful outcome.

Michael: I want to ask about Robert's presentation to the United Nation's Youth Camp at Cuernavaca. We published photos of both pages of Robert's autobiographical introduction.

Vivian: That was fun. That introduction was very creative! He had not liked the conventional biography I had prepared, and he tore it up at once coming up with this little note.

Carl: He literally or figuratively tore it up?

Vivian: Literally!

Michael: Do you recall anything he said at that presentation, or any questions that prompted a response from him?

Vivian: I don't recall his words to tell you the truth. Different poets spoke at the camp, but I don't recall whether Robert intervened other than at the introduction of the event.

Michael: It was interesting to read your recollections of Robert jotting down notes for himself all the time. I don't remember reading elsewhere that he made notes for himself.

Vivian: His letters are a good example of this habit: the paper was scribbled all over – like an *aide mémoire*, or rather like a child's scrap book.

Michael: Did you send all those notes to Oxford, or did you keep some for yourself?

Vivian: I kept copies of all those notes. I thought it would be better to save the originals somewhere else. Oxford was a natural choice because it counts as such a good archive of Graves's letters.

Michael: Do you remember the kinds of things that prompted him to write? Just everything?

Vivian: He liked to record everything – it seemed as if he were writing a newsletter. He would tell me about his work, about his new books, about the problems he was having with his daughter in Australia, about a thief who came into the house.<sup>18</sup> He wrote about everyday life in the core of the family. But it was not a straightforward account. He often had a second thought, and he would add a few words in the margin of the page commenting: ‘I think I already told you about that in my last letter’. He once wrote: ‘I love you’, and quickly explained on the margin, ‘actually, love means to have a bond with someone’.

Michael: You say. ‘I later learned that at this stage in his life, having suffered certain physical and mental deterioration, he had become confused in his philosophy of love. He still felt entitled to have a central Muse to whom he was loyal, and who he reinvented time and time again through his poetry, but it did not exclude his desire to have other Muses as well.’ Do you have any other recollections about that, or any thoughts about that?

Vivian: Robert spoke at length about Juli, the dancer, because she was the Muse of the moment. He made comments about her and about the qualities that characterized a Muse. She had to be a virgin, above all. That is strange because his other Muses were no virgins, and it leads me to wonder if the Muse was an imaginary figure or a real figure. In this case, Juli certainly existed. We know that she was his goddaughter’s sister who had come to visit him in Mallorca when she was seventeen. They had danced together in the garden, and she had revealed the special feeling that drew her to Robert. Her discovery was utmost important for Robert. In his philosophy, the Muse is responsible for revealing the love that exists between two people and the magic that binds them together. Robert’s concept of love relies on that. His role as a poet was to translate the concept into words.

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Michael: You excerpted from a letter Robert wrote to you in January 1969. 'I feel lousy, but I love you and my other loves dearly. *Amore vincit omnia.*'

Vivian: Exactly. I mentioned above the question of having a bond. Love is to have a bond with someone.

Michael: He says, 'Love is also always a bind'. Which is ironic. I mean. Is it his dark side coming to the fore? 'Love is always a bind', in the sense of a predicament? And you say Robert gave an 'overbearing significance to love'. 'Love binds us together and gives us the possibility of endurance and resilience toward all obstacles.'

Vivian: So maybe after the awful experience of the war, love is his way out!

Michael: Do you know if Robert had any occasion to meet Enriqueta Basilio? Did she happen to respond to his poetic praise?

Vivian: He met her only briefly because she was always surrounded by crowds. It was her moment of glory, and she paid no individual attention to anyone. She attended a cocktail party with a lot of people and devoted a little time to Robert. There was a bit of small talk, but it was short-lived.

Michael: There's a question about the Olympics about Tommy Smith and John Carlos giving the Black Power salute in the United States. We saw their actions in terms of Civil Rights.

Vivian: Exactly.

Michael Joseph: Yeah. And it was a forceful, supportive gesture toward the Black Panthers.

Vivian: Exactly.



Michael: But did you get a sense in Mexico that that was also a gesture that was sympathetic to the plight of the Mexican poor, or anger over the slain students?

Vivian: Absolutely. Although it pertained to the Civil Rights movement mostly, as you say, I was pushed to write about it because it is a current cause reflected in today's Black Lives Matter. The image is kept alive in our minds.

Michael: Do you remember if Robert responded to their gesture, if he noticed it and commented on it?

Vivian: No, he didn't comment on it. He just watched.

Michael: You write: 'We tried to put aside the event at *Tlatelolco* and the student unrest, though their shadow hung over us and remained in our memories for years'.

Vivian: It was terrible.

Michael: It was terrible, of course, unspeakable. Did Robert talk about it, and did he relate it to his own war experience?

Vivian: He didn't speak about it openly. Privately, we talked about it, and he was horrified. Besides, there was no mention of the massacre in the media.

Michael: That's right. But privately he indicated he was aware of it?

Vivian: Yes.

Michael: And he had a reaction to it?

Vivian: Yes.

Michael: About the Queen, Robert writes, 'I had a long talk with her and she's a real woman. Isn't that good news?' What did he mean by that?

Vivian: She was a 'real woman' because he felt he could talk to her freely. He mentions in his letter. 'I talked to her just like I'm talking to you.' You could have a conversation with her. And this is absolutely true. She was a real person not just a figure.

Michael: So, he means she was down to earth. She wasn't a lofty, head in the clouds, fairy tale Queen.

Vivian: Not at all.

Michael: You write that Robert repeated himself for emphasis. Some people close to Robert notice that as early as 1960 he began to experience a mental decline, which would have been eight years before he came to Mexico.

Vivian: He mentioned once that he felt very upset by the fact that he didn't remember his good friends anymore, i.e. all the heroes from the Greek mythology. He only could recall a few people, and that was very sad.

Michael: You quote Robert as saying, 'the purpose of every scholar should be to interpret the myths at the heart of every religion'.

Vivian: Yes.

Michael: What do you think he meant by 'every scholar?'

Vivian: Robert was himself a scholar, but a rather peculiar scholar. He wrote extensively about myths and their relation to religion. He was very egocentric and considered that everything should revolve around his own interests. Therefore, I assume that he extended the purpose of his work to every other scholar who would want to explore his field. I can't say more than that. On the one hand, Robert did not call himself an official scholar. It was a more private thing. He did not like to be a professor, let's say, at Oxford. He did not like to be in a university, because then it became routine. But he

liked to be a scholar on his own merit. And there is where he would like to go into the myths.

Michael: And he saw the interpreting of the myths as being the heart of scholarship, then, that in whatever field one was a scholar?

Vivian: Yes, absolutely, for him it was at the heart of everything.

Michael: He had a profound commitment to religion and saw mythology as being the core of religion, I think.

Vivian: Because he was not religious himself. He was averse to religion, but mythology he liked, and he went into big discoveries, for example, regarding the mushrooms, if you combined the first letter of certain words or of certain Greek villages, you would come up with a word that translates from the Greek into 'mushroom'. And that takes you back to mythology. By eating certain mushrooms, you could access a world beyond the one that surrounds us.

Michael: You also say that he believed that by combining the first letter of certain cities, one could spell the name of the mushroom that was commonly used in the mystery rites for those cities. That's so fascinating. That's an incredible discovery, or it's an incredible invention. I honestly don't know which.

Vivian: He was very, very keen on this. When I met him in London once, he only spoke about this new interpretation. He had just discovered it and was extremely excited. He talked and talked and only expected me to listen in exchange. He never waited for a response.

Michael Joseph: He was ...

Vivian: Wrapped up in his own thoughts.

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Carl: Graves's longest book is called *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. And it runs to a thousand pages. And, in it, basically he's rewriting the Bible. And I've always been puzzled about what I see as Graves's ambivalence about religion. On the one hand, you know, he says he doesn't have a religion, and, on the other hand, he spends an enormous amount of time talking about religious subjects. It's always puzzled me.

Vivian: Why do you think that happened? Is it because of his interest in myths? Is it because he felt an affinity with the characters and heroes in mythology? Or is it because he related better to an inner world of fantasy rather than to the world around him? I don't know.

Carl: I don't know.

Michael: I think, it's the ontological question we all are obsessed by. We all want to know what is real, what matters. And that was the question that burns through all of Robert's poetry, and all through his writing: What actually has value? What makes things valuable? Why do we believe what we believe?

Vivian: Exactly. It's the inner questions to which we have no answer.

Michael: I think that's one of the reasons he's a great poet, not just a good poet, but a great poet. Because he asks the hard questions, and he continues to poke at the answers.

Vivian: He studied the Egyptian religion, the Jewish religion and kept in mind his Christian heritage among others. He never stopped searching for answers to the unanswerable.

Michael: And part of that is having had a Victorian upbringing, I think. You have that orientation – one has that orientation – toward looking for answers in conventions and organization. And one is naturally disposed toward finding the answers in scholarship. I

mean, he becomes more of an empiricist as he gets older, and in the nineteen sixties particularly, he's more engaged in so-called New Age thinking and mushrooms. But his earlier orientation is toward texts and scholarship.

Vivian: The mushrooms were a last resort, that would lead to entering the Doors of Paradise. He was very keen on crossing that threshold. He repeated often how in a former visit to Mexico he had taken mushrooms, but those Doors had remained locked. He had come back to Mexico this time with the idea of taking mushrooms anew and their allowing him to attain the Nirvana of poetry.

Michael: When Robert talked about mushrooms, did you think he was interested purely in obtaining knowledge, or did you think he was interested in something more fantastic, like escaping death?

Vivian: He never spoke about death. His sole aspiration was to reach a summit, the apex of poetry and another reality.

Michael: That's a wonderful answer. Thank you. On his visit to London, you write, Robert had 'become tormented by strange visions of faraway places'. Can you elaborate on that at all?

Vivian: In London, he spoke about mushrooms, and about his discoveries. That was the core of the conversation. I was back to where I had started when we first met because his *sole interest* was mushrooms. The visions may have been related to the locations in Greece where the mushrooms grew. As I said before, he was fixated on the topic.

Michael: You said he was agitated about these visions. Were you worried about his health at that point?

Vivian: He spoke about his health in his letters. He had had a nose operation, he was hospitalized, he felt tired. In person, he never spoke about his health.

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Michael: But you say he was very agitated when he was talking and were you thinking. *Gee, this guy is kind of upset. I wonder what's going on, if he's okay?*

Vivian: Not really. I was twenty and one does not think at length about health or death at that age. He told me that Juli had come to see him at the hospital, but he didn't go beyond that. He immediately jumped to the substantive subjects that troubled him.

Michael: What was your sense of Juli's influence on Robert?

Vivian: He spoke about her. She was his Muse; all his poetry was devoted to her, and she was his source of magic at the moment.

Michael: We both found your discussion of the Muses interesting and powerful.

Vivian: I'm only repeating what he told me.

Michael: You write:

He despised their unfaithfulness and their lack of total commitment. Even with Laura Riding, the woman who had the most influence in his life, love had come to an end. Deep disappointment and suffering had followed, and he was forced to set her aside. He remained loyal to his old Muses, showing generosity towards them, but they were no longer his source of inspiration. They had fulfilled their role; their virtues were lost, and the poet had to carry on.

Vivian: Suffering made Robert despair. He needed to find a new Muse to replace the one he discarded to give new life to his creativity.

Michael: I love that whole description, but I'm particularly taken by, 'He despised their unfaithfulness'. Did he say that, or did you understand that those were his feelings?

Vivian: I think both. His Muses fulfilled their role when they ceased to love Robert exclusively. The Muses were often much younger than him and after a while they tended to replace him with another companion. Robert was unable to accept that situation. He even discarded the most important of his Muses, Laura Riding, because she was too strong: she corrected his poetry and stopped considering him the sole object of her admiration. I ignore the details, but he decided after a while that she was not worthy to be his Muse and needed to find a replacement. The process of replacing one muse by another inflicted pain. It was difficult for him to admit his suffering, but he was obliged to go through it before finding his next Muse. She would be the new source of inspiration for the poetry that was meant to be offered to the primeval goddess of creativity, the White Goddess.

Michael: And you write that you found the house he had for Juli somewhat unreal, and one which could have easily sprung up from Cervantes's *Don Quixote de la Mancha*.

Vivian: Absolutely.

Michael: Was there some sense in which you viewed Robert, somewhat, as the addled knight, Don Quixote?

Vivian: Absolutely. His own house was very simple. I am talking about his everyday house with Beryl; there were no ornaments, no fancy furniture, nothing to show off. Whereas the Muse's little house was beautifully whitewashed, and full of precious objects brought back from his travels and ranged in a meticulous order, like a museum: through these objects he could prove that his many adventures had really happened and that they had not been a product of his imagination. Like a knight from the Middle Ages, he had paid tribute to his dame by bringing her back special gifts. Fantasy and reality were thus intertwined within his living quarters.

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Michael Joseph: Doubtlessly you had read *Don Quixote* before you met Robert.

Vivian: Oh, yes.

Michael: So, I wonder if, right from the start, when you saw Robert stepping off the plane, disheveled, without his visa did you think, oh, here's the English Quixote.

Vivian: I did not know him yet to be able to get to that conclusion. But after my visit to Mallorca, it was definitely that! There could not have been any doubt about it.

Michael Joseph: Yes.

Vivian: He was the knight, and the gifts for his Muse were there.

Michael: Yes. I saw many of them when I was in Deià, in that beautiful house. It was like a museum.

Vivian: In a few of his letters, he would mention an object and give the whole description of it. And then there was the story of the medal. This question of whether it was real gold or not real was very funny. He despised the medal he got from the Mexican Olympic Committee because it was not real gold, whereas the one the Queen gave him was gold. That incident makes me think of the Latin poet Propertius, who also gave a lot of importance to gold. Maybe Robert was following his steps.

Carl: The Queen's medal was stolen from his house.

Vivian: Sorry?

Carl: The medal he got from the Queen disappeared from the house.

Vivian: He spoke about having a theft in the house in one of his letters.



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Carl: Well, I don't know if that was the theft. I don't know when it occurred, but it did go missing.

Vivian: What he didn't write about was all the windows being smashed in the house and somebody coming in. I don't know if this was a vision, or if it really happened. He never went into the detail.

Carl: I don't know. I'm puzzled by that as well.

Michael: How much did Robert's approval of your boyfriend mean to you? Did you feel that the world of myth and romance was conferring a blessing upon your relationship?

Vivian: That was very funny, because he did not like the first boyfriend whom he met at the Mermaid Theatre in London, because he was a banker, and he did not like bankers. On the other hand, he liked the second boyfriend, because he found that he had so much more in common with me. 'A very suitable match', he wrote.

Michael: Andrés?

Vivian: Yes.

Michael: The story of your meeting sounds so Gravesean to me. Did you have moments when you thought, oh, I'm caught up in the same myth that Robert's talking about. This is reality, now.

Vivian: Now that you mention it, it was a Gravesean moment. But no, I was not thinking about Robert and his myths when I met Andrés. I had not put them together. Our relationship developed very quickly.

Michael: Quickly. Oh, that's nice. The story of your friendship with Robert is so rich and beautiful to me. I just love that you meet him just after college, and then circumstances crumble around you, but the way they become the basis for a friendship.

Vivian: It was a very good friendship, but I was never his Muse. Maybe I was, and he didn't say so.

Michael: There are some things we'll never know. But you must have reflected on the ways this affected your life. Did you ever take an interest in his other poetry, in his writing and his poems? Did you become a scholar? A private scholar?

Vivian: I read quite a bit of his work although not everything. I read *Good-Bye to All That*, *I, Claudius*, and some of the poetry. Not all. What else? *The White Goddess* ....

Michael: Well, soon you'll have 10,000 letters to read.

Vivian: Have you read all of Robert's writing?

Michael: I haven't read *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. Apologies, Carl, for that.

Carl: I don't know if anyone living has.

Vivian: *The Hebrew Myths*?

Michael: Yeah. Oh, yes. I read *The Hebrew Myths* with much interest.

Michael: So, we're coming to the end.

Carl: Is there anything that you would like to say about something we've asked you, or perhaps something we neglected to ask you?

Vivian: I think we have covered all aspects of what my relationship to Robert was. I met him late in his life. He was already over seventy years old. We developed a very close friendship, and I believe that we have gone over all the topics. Is there anything else that you would like to know?

Carl: Approximately how many letters did he write to you?

Vivian: I never counted them. I'll tell you next time. At the beginning the letters were frequent, about twice a month. Later, they became more distant, but they always showed up.

Michael: Were they always intelligible or decipherable? I mean, his handwriting ....

Vivian: His handwriting is difficult to read. But with a little effort, they are totally decipherable.

Michael: Okay. I look forward to reading them. Vivian, thank you very much for this conversation.

Vivian: I hope it helped you understand the great fun it was to have gotten to know Robert.

Michael Oh, it did.

Vivian: I hope I answered your questions and did not distract you too much with some anecdotes that were outside the realm Robert Graves letters and accomplishments in Mexico in 1968.

Michael: But inside the realm of an oral history. Oral histories tend to wander. They wrap around the subject. And context is always helpful, and we both appreciate so much your having given us the time and your attention.

Vivian: It has been fun to remember all that period.

Michael: Well, what a memorable figure! It's always fun remembering him. He was always the most cheerful person.

Vivian: Absolutely!

Michael: Everything he said was always aimed to, to please, I think, to entertain or instruct.

Vivian: *Instruct*. That's a key word, I think. He was always referring to obscure things. I even made fun of myself because I did not understand sometimes what he was talking about.

Michael: Nobody understood what he was always talking about. He seemed to know more about everything than anybody.

Vivian: Right.

Michael: It was a privilege to meet him, and a great honour for me and I've really enjoyed so much talking to you about him.

Vivian: We'll meet again.

Carl: Thank you very much Vivian. It's been a joy, instructive, and most of all, wonderful.

Vivian: Thank you.

**Vivian Holzer Rozental** came to Mexico at the age of two and has lived there ever since. She earned university degrees at Bryn Mawr College and Columbia University. After her studies in the USA, Vivian worked in the cultural department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as an editor for various publications. She is married to a career Mexican Ambassador and has lived in the UK, Switzerland and Sweden. They have two daughters and four grandchildren.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vivian Holzer Rozental, 'Poetry and the Olympics, 1968 Mexico, Robert Graves', *The Robert Graves Review* (1.2).

<<https://robertgravesreview.org/essay.php?essay=422&tab=6>> [accessed 24 January 2024]. A Spanish edition of a pre-edited version of Vivian Rozental's essay appears in Vivian Holzer Rozental, 'La poesía y la Olimpiada: Robert Graves en México, 1968' *Nexos*, 1 July 2023 <<https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=73791>> accessed 5 July 2024]

<sup>2</sup> What we refer to as The Symposium was originally conceived as The International Reunion of Poets. However, political protests carved away much of the planned program, and kept away most of the invited poets.

<sup>3</sup> Invited poets, in addition to Robert Graves, were Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1932–17); Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970); Pablo Neruda (1914–73); René Char (1917–88); Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001); Octavio Paz (1914–1998); Odysseas Elytis (1911–99); Robert Lowell (1917–77); Stephen Spender (1909–95).

<sup>4</sup> Enriqueta Basilio (1948–2019) was a Mexican track and field athlete, best remembered as the first woman to carry the Olympic torch and light the *pebetero* on 12 October 1968, during the inauguration of the Olympic Games.

<sup>5</sup> María del Pilar Pellicer López de Llergo (1938–2020) was a Mexican actress. James 'Jimmy' Metcalf (1925–2012) was an American artist, director. Metcalf won the commission to forge the Olympic torch for the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Metcalf and Graves collaborated on *Adam's Rib*, published in 1958.

<sup>6</sup> 'The first issue appeared in May of 1919 The magazine ran to only two numbers but was briefly resurrected as the *Winter Owl* for one issue in November of 1923'. Matthew Vaughn, 'The Owl: An Introduction' *Modernist Journals Project*, Brown and Tulsa Universities ongoing <<https://modjourn.org/the-owl-an-introduction/>> [accessed 5 July 2024]

<sup>7</sup> George Rosenkranz (1916–2019) was a Hungarian Mexican chemist best remembered for his having used plants to ‘synthesize the key ingredient in what became the oral contraceptive known as “the pill.”’ Robert D. McFadden, ‘George Rosenkranz, 102, a Developer of the Birth Control Pill, is Dead’, *The New York Times* 23 June 2019

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/23/obituaries/george-rosenkranz-dies-at-102.html>> [accessed 24 January 2024]

<sup>8</sup> Juli Simon. For more about Juli Simon see Lucia Graves, ‘The Correspondence Between Robert and Beryl Graves’ in this issue.

<sup>9</sup> Ramón Xirau Subías (1914–2017), Mexican born Spanish poet, philosopher, literary critic.

<sup>10</sup> The *Franquistas* (Sp.) were the supporters of the dictator, Francisco Franco (1892–1975).

<sup>11</sup> Palace of Fine Arts in the historical center of Mexico City.

<sup>12</sup> Also included at the *Club de Periodistas* (The Mexican Press Club) were the poets Rubén Bonifaz Nuño (1923–2013) and Andrés Henestrosa (1906–2008).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Maynard Jones (1929–2017) was a poet and writer who specialized in the history of the Welsh language.

<sup>14</sup> As of this writing (23 June 2023), The Robert Graves Letters website estimates the number of letters to be about 10,000. <https://robertgravesletters.org/about-website>. William Graves estimates the St. John’s College Library holds about 15,000 manuscripts of all kinds in his “Robert Graves Trust and Related” in the 2021 issue of *The Robert Graves Review* 1.1

<<https://www.robertgravesreview.org/essay.php?essay=402&tab=>>> [accessed 5 July 2024]

<sup>15</sup> Mohamed-Salah Omri is Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature at the University of Oxford and Tutorial Fellow at St John’s College.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Riding (b. 1943), British journalist and author, longtime foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*.

<sup>17</sup> Various names have been applied, although Vietnam War is the most common name in English.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Nicholson, later Dalton (1922–2009).