

Outside the Imaginary Museum: mythology and representation in the poetry of Lynette Roberts and Keidrych Rhys

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Outside the Imaginary Museum: mythology and representation in the poetry of Lynette

Roberts and Keidrych Rhys

In 1957 Donald Davie gave a radio talk in which he reflected upon the implications for modern poetry of André Malraux's idea of the 'imaginary museum'. Advances in technology and scholarship had changed the way that the modern visual artist could access a diversity of artistic and cultural tradition, and Davie was giving thought to the related challenges that face the modern poet:

The problem for the poet is not that he has no mythology to use, but that he has no one such mythology, in other words, that he has too many mythologies to choose among and nothing to direct him which one to choose in any given case, nothing to tell him which of the innumerable galleries in the imaginary museum are those he should frequent.¹

Poetry is a special case, Davie argues, subject to the same developments in anthropology that opened up a diversity of materials to the modern artist, and yet limited by the lack of a true lingua franca. The anxiety for the modern poet is that she may become either too provincial or too international. In relation to the imaginary museum, he claims, 'poetry finds itself in an uncomfortable betwixt and between' (p. 50). Davie was also reflecting on the differing responses to this imaginary museum of his generation, and the generation of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (whose language in *The Cantos*, Davie says, is 'literally international'). Like many critics since he elides the generation of writers who came between the earlier modernists and his own contemporaries. But it is through the work of two poets, Lynette Roberts and Keidrych Rhys, whose greatest achievements came in the late 1930s and 1940s, that I want to explore some of the areas opened up by Davie's proposition.

Roberts and Rhys married each other in the early weeks of World War II, with a sense of place, tradition and austerity symbolized in the wild flowers that the bride picked for the occasion. Roberts had met her husband-to-be in bohemian London, where she was a poet, artist, and professional florist. That they should choose to marry in Rhys's home county of Carmarthenshire, adorned with wild welsh flowers, and set up home there in the village of Llanybri, underlined a commitment to their Welsh heritage and future.

Their early married life was overshadowed by a war that brought them great personal difficulties, but also gave them a poetic subject matter. Rhys was conscripted into the army as an Anti-Aircraft Gunner in July 1940, and until his discharge in 1942 he served at

various locations around Britain. The events leading to Rhys's discharge gave occasion for Roberts to write for the first time to World War One veteran Robert Graves, and a lengthy correspondence ensued, which, as Graves was later to acknowledge, was important in the genesis and development of *The White Goddess*. This passage, from a letter by Roberts of 27 January 1944, is characteristic of their exchange:

Wasn't it the Armenians who first adopted the symbols of the constellations. And you wrote of the 3 tracks of the Celts: did you imply the 3rd track of the stars: for the sea route was, I understand, entirely directed from the stars – and I believe by the dog or Sirius track. The dog annwn always worked, as I have said before in Welsh Mythology in the 1st story of the Mabinogion Pwyll – the border stone lying between Cwmcelyn – the Monastery ruins on River Abercowyn of Dyfed.²

Roberts further comments that 'this is a horrible letter', by which she refers to the various crossings out, seeming non-sequiturs, and possibly the bright green ink in which it was written. Indeed, the one effort to transcribe and publish the letter, in the special edition of *Poetry Wales* from 1983 that is devoted to Roberts, contains several misreadings and omissions. I am not concerned with the credibility of the anthropological, geographical, historical and mythological ground covered by Roberts, but I do note the extraordinary layering of it, and the bold, poetic associations of seemingly disparate ideas. She is not the first to suggest that the Celts were descendants of Phoenician traders who navigated to Europe by the stars, but there are all kinds of fizzing impertinent connections in addition: Sirius is the dog star, so must be related to other manifestations of the mythologically canine, including here the dogs of Annwn, Annwn in Welsh mythology being the other world, and its dogs an omen of death. But most striking is the way in which this odyssey of ideas is seen as rooted in the immediate geography of Roberts's wartime home in the village of Llanybri. A short walk away from the village is the farmstead Cwmcelyn, from which the bay on the estuary takes its name, and there are ecclesiastical remains across the mouth of Afon Cywyn, near to a series of bronze-age border stones. In writing to Graves about these connections Roberts had found a further outlet for ideas which earlier in the war provided the subject for a 'domestic' war poem, entitled 'The Circle of C', first published in *Life and Letters* in April 1941, and which, according to its appearance in Tambimuttu's 1942 anthology *Poetry in Wartime*, was written on 3 December 1940:

I walk and cinder bats riddle my cloak

I walk to Cwmcelyn ask prophets the way

‘There is no way they cried crouched on the hoarstone rock
And the dogs of Annwn roared louder than of late.’ [...]

But what of my love I cried
As a curlew stabbed the sand:

And we cut for the answer. They said
‘He would not come as he said he would come
But later with sailing ice, war glass and fame:
Grieve not it is better so.’

I left the Bay, wing-felled and bogged
Kicked the shale despondent and green³

In an explanatory note to this poem appended to Faber’s edition of her *Poems* (1944) she makes the same associations between the dogs of Annwn, Cwmcelyn, and the hoarstone, or border stone, that she points out to Graves, adding some further connections:

The legend [of the Dogs of Annwn] is no doubt associated with Sirius and the third sea-track of the Phoenicians which may have guided those people to our shore: with Kerberos: and later to emerge as “Cŵn Ebrill”, when curlews crying at night are said to hunt for the souls of the dead. I have used this image as an interpretation of the raiders droning over estuary and hill; their stiff and ghostly flight barking terror into the hearts of the villagers.
(*Collected Poems*, p. 38)

This extends the poem text, connecting the dogs of Annwn to Cerberus at the gates of hell, and to the curlews whose eerie cry gives rise in Welsh folklore to the “Cŵn Ebrill”, the dogs of April. Such folklore is in part the subject of a poem by R. Williams Parry, translated by Rhys at the end of the war:

Like a hidden shepherd’s whistling
Your call is heard midnight;
Until is heard, when your note deepens,
The barking of your invisible dogs.⁴

But perhaps more interesting than the game of ideas by association, so characteristic also of Graves in *The White Goddess*, is the way in which the note opens up to clearer scrutiny the poem’s subject of war. Without the note one might observe the separation of lovers, and register the militaristic prophecy that her love will come back ‘with sailing ice,

war glass and fame'. But with the note there is a further resonance: the dogs of Annwn become the German bomber planes that had been active in South Wales through November and December 1940, and on 4 December the *Manchester Guardian* reported a Ministries of Air and Home Security communiqué which identified that on the previous night, the day upon which the poem was written, bombs were dropped on South Wales. In her poetic apprehension of this experience I argue that Roberts is not inside an imaginary museum; that particular trope for the situation of the modern poet here feels inadequate, not least because she is immersed in a landscape that has, to her mind, a direct and living connection with the mythology to which it has given rise. She is not strolling between imaginary gallery wings; her mythography instead results from a relationship between mythology and geography and circumstance permeated by real danger and fear. If we are not necessarily to imagine cinder ash floating from the sky after a raid, holing or inundating (riddling) her cloak, we should note that the metaphorical air is thick with the detritus of war's destruction. Towards the poem's conclusion she leaves the bay 'wing felled and bogged', in a metaphorical identification with the curlew observed on the water's edge, which is allied to the ambivalence of 'Kicked the shale despondent and green', where the adjectival qualification applies equally to the shale (in pathetic fallacy) and also to 'I'.

The metaphorical collocation of curlew and lyric voice is continued in another of Roberts's poems, simply titled 'The Curlew', in which a particular kind of green is descriptive both of the bird's colourings and song:

A curlew hovers and haunts the room.
On bare boards creak its filleted feet:
For freedom intones four notes of doom,

Crept, slept, wept, kept, under aerial gloom:
With Europe restless in his wing beat,
A curlew hovers and haunts the room:

Fouls wire, pierces the upholstery bloom,
Strikes window pane with shagreen bleat (*Collected Poems*, p. 15)

Shagreen is a type of leather with a rough surface, frequently dyed green. The word here gives the texture and colour of the curlew's appearance, and adds to the onomatopoeia which throughout renders its music. In a version of synaesthesia, Roberts is hearing colour and seeing sound. That the etymology of the word also leads to chagrin, where the rough

skin becomes 'by metaphor the expression for gnawing trouble' (*OED*) would also not have escaped Roberts's attention. I stress the point because the word becomes the site of some technical anxiety between Graves and Roberts in their correspondence, and their exchange highlights ways in which her experimentalism was being policed by at least two literary authorities uncomfortable with what might equally be recognized as fertile exploration of poetic language. Roberts sent Graves her book of recently published poems, and in December 1944 Graves wrote back in the capacity of elder statesman, somewhat alarmed by her disquieting modernist tendencies: 'I'd like to question you about [...] your views on how much interrelation of dissociated ideas is possible in a single line without bursting the sense – you tempt disaster in the 'curlew's shagreen bleat' for example' (*Poetry Wales*, p. 82). In her politic reply Roberts ostensibly assents to the right-mindedness of the criticism, revealing that Eliot also had negative things to say about the poem, but demonstrates her steel by upping the 'dissociative' stakes in her lines of explanation, glossing the potentially disastrous line with a neologistic and synaesthetic adjective that has no official status at all: 'I had in mind the shagreen quality of its legs – the greezing [sic] gooseflesh of its voice' (*Poetry Wales*, p. 84).

The poem is a curtailed villanelle where the enclosure of form contains a curlew caught in a room. The curlew is eventually let out through the window, but, through the poem's refrain, 'A curlew hovers and haunts the room', is returned to a kind of captivity at the end. That we are supposed to read this as allegorical of war experience is made clear by Roberts herself in the same letter to Graves: 'I *did* want to get the feeling of frustration in relation to the bird's imprisonment and lack of wholesome environment *in relation* to all peoples living in this world today'.

Roberts's *Collected Poems* is suffused with bird poems and images, reflecting her detailed interests in natural history and geography, and ways in which birds embody aspects of myth, in addition to their traditional associations with flight, freedom, captivity, and music. In the following diary entry she measures her wartime circumstance against the migrating patterns of birds:

I find it [the wind] refreshing to my general mood of disturbance which occurs just before the birds' first migration flight. But the question arises, where shall I go and when? For instinct cannot altogether guide those who

are caught in the chains of culture and a barbaric civilisation. But we are at war so there remains only 'chance' or fate to guide our footsteps.⁵

In the absence of a continuous critical history, and merely partial bibliographical records for Roberts and Rhys, chance plays a significant part in their reinstatement to a contemporary readership. The searches I undertook in producing an edition of Rhys's *Collected Poems* found many of his poems scattered amongst the far reaches of small-press and other publications throughout the late 1930s and 40s, where they lay neglected since their first publication. Roberts and Rhys shared literary networks, and searching for Rhys also led me to various uncollected poems by Roberts. One such poem, 'The Orange Charger', published for the first and only time in *Life and Letters*, clarifies further the representative possibilities she saw inherent in bird subjects. Her diary entry of 6 February 1947 records her reading David Lack's seminal work of natural history on the robin, and some reflections on poetry and ecology:

It is my intention one day to write a poem on this masterful young creature. Not a 'garden spade' poem: but something which holds the whole measure of this bird. Of its migration, communal interest, clear personality and sweet voice which somehow seems to follow the rain so that its song contains the mingled freshness of the rain and clearness of the sun.
(*Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, p. 75)

The uncollected poem she wrote in response to this impulse continues her Romantic recognition that the bird represents the symbol of wished-for freedoms and possibilities to which the lyrical voice can only aspire, albeit with a nostalgic recognition that her youthful experience of life in Argentina, and her continental migrations to Europe via Madeira and back, allows her a degree of identification with her subject. Both endure the Welsh rain with differing degrees of equanimity, where the robin:

loves to migrate
And not to migrate,
Or sits with wistful isolation
In the perennial springs of the Azores.

(*'The Orange Charger'*)

Throughout the poem, 'spring', as both noun and verb, signifies rhythm and seasonal renewal, an interconnection which is developed further in another uncollected poem, entitled 'Spring', which celebrates the King of Spring at the beginning, and the ascendance of the Queen of Spring at the poem's close. The harmony of avian and floral music at the

start ('Spring rules the world with open wing / And leaves that sing vibrate the air / with birds so rare') begins the representation of the season through its bird life, from the 'roundelay of gorselit birds' to later migrant arrivals: 'With wingbeat drumming, geese, cuckoo, / Warblers too, swifts scissored hum'. Roberts makes the Queen of Spring cognate with the goddess Artemis, but this manifestation is understood alongside aspects of the local myth and legend to which her immediate environment has given rise:

The farm bull white of sacred race
With bindweed lace and aconite
Recalls a rite of age-long grace:

Disturbs the trout's rock-pooled display ('Spring')

Much of what might at first appear a rather hermetic imagery is the result of Roberts's mythological researches, which for several years paralleled, and informed, Graves's hunt for the white goddess. However, in addition to the evocations of any number of myths of bovine sacrifice, Roberts also inhabits here a Welsh legend that emerges from the immediate geography of Rhys's childhood, and one which gave him the title for his slim volume of poems published during his lifetime: *The Van Pool* (1942). In brief, the legend of the lady in the lake from Llyn y Fan Fach tells of a young farmer who one day discovers a fairy lady sitting on top of a mountain lake where he tends his cattle. He falls in love, and it takes three attempts to woo her, firstly with hard-baked, then under-baked, and finally perfectly-baked bread, before she agrees to become his wife. Her father provides a miraculous dowry of cattle, but there is also a proviso that should the farmer give his wife three blows without cause, she must return to the lake forever and bring her cattle with her. The pattern of three is the folklore staple: three times he takes her the bread in courtship, and three times he delivers 'causeless' blows in marriage, the first a tap on her shoulder with a pair of gloves, the second a touch on her shoulder when she cries at a wedding (she cries, because by marrying, people are entering into trouble), and the third when she rejoices at a funeral (here, following the pattern, she cries because people who die leave trouble behind). At the third touch she calls her cattle together, including her white bull, and the little black calf already suspended on a meat hook. This legend takes place in the spring, and four ploughing oxen return also, leaving a furrow ploughed into the lake itself. If this legend is only distantly evoked in 'Spring', it provides the structuring narrative for one

further uncollected poem, published as the first poem of the first number of *Departure* in 1952, and not since. In 'You within the Enchanted Circle' she locates the moment of legendary separation in a Hardy-esque description of the onset of autumn:

Now as the monstrous season turns,
Thins the buttermilk of days,
Scouring his heart, and her mind:
At her command over the rippled lake,
At the third blow, turned,

Called her young heifer of flour white hide,
Bid her black bull calf 'Prydein come.'
All three dissolved into the wavering haze,
To her living grave and Lake of Birth,
Like midges in the air.

Given the publication date it is likely that this poem was written in the period following the divorce of Rhys and Roberts at the end of the 1940s, but it is interesting not as biographical cipher. Lyrical experience is understood through the clarifying immediacy of myth and legend in a living and localised language. She is not just seeing the same pattern manifest in different cultures, periods and languages (Graves's method in *The White Goddess*); rather, she is creating a living poetic language from the legends of the landscape within which she is writing.

One year earlier, in 1951, Faber published Roberts's long heroic poem, *Gods with Stainless Ears*, which was written in the early 1940s. Part II of the poem also construes the immediacy of her wartime experience through the Llyn y Fan Fach legend. Before returning to the lake, the fairy lady gives birth to three sons, to whom she gives the secrets of healing powers, and from whom the legendary 'physicians of Myddfai' are descended. When the soldier protagonist of the poem returns on leave, suffering from war and ill health, it is to the healing powers of Myddfai that she turns: 'To their aid. To his aid. To my lover. / Under tincture of Myddfai Hills'. The medicine of locally mythic origin fuses with the more immediate healing powers of the local beers:

With magic and craft
To heel. Without abbreviation or contraction
Take thou my lover 4 pints from the 'Farmers' Arms'
Or, if flat, 6 glass tankards from Jones
'Black Horse'.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 55)

Part II of *Gods with Stainless Ears* begins with a section that was printed as a short poem in its own right in *Poems* (1944). It takes the form of a challenge, as the accompanying prose 'Argument' tells us, 'to all people to discard their sorrow, break through destruction and outshine the sun'. At its centre is a gramophone on rocks by the water's edge, a solitary remnant of an allied plane crash. It begins:

We must uprise O my people. Though
Secretly trenched in sorrel, we must
Upshine, outshine the day's sun. (*Collected Poems*, p. 53)

The language revels in etymology and homophony: 'trenched' has its inevitable and singular evocations of warfare; in 'sorrel' (not sorrow, although this is heard by the ear as well), as sorrel derives from an etymological root that also gives us the word 'sour', the bitterness of war symbolised in the green bitterness of the herb. The poem stretches such experimental poetic language further:

On gault and green stone a gramophone stands,

In zebeline stripes strike out the pilotless
Age: from saxophone towns brass out the dead:
Disinter futility that we entombing men
Might curb our runaway hearts. –
On tamarisk; on seafield pools shivering

With water-cats, ring out the square slate notes
Shape the birdbox trees with neumes, wind sound
Singular into cool and simple corners
Round pale bittern grass and all unseen
Unknown places of sheltered rubble

Where whimbrels, redshanks, sandpipers ripple
For the wing of living. Under tin of earth,
From wooden boles where owls break music;
From this killing world against humanity
Uprise against, – outshine the day's sun. (*Collected Poems*, p. 53)

Patrick McGuinness's editorial note to the earlier incarnation of this passage in *Poems* (1944) returns us to elder-statesman policing. In November 1943 her publisher T.S. Eliot wrote to Roberts telling her it was a mistake to put all of these words into one poem: '*plimsole, cuprite, zebeline and neumes*', and following Roberts's answer replied: 'I like your defence of your queer words [,] and now accept all of them, but I am still not happy about

zebeline, which appears to be a Lewis Carroll invention' (*Collected Poems*, pp. 139–40). And yet the definition of 'zibeline', of which *zebeline* is an acknowledged variant, was first published in the *OED* in 1921, and by the 1930s referred to the fur of the sable, or a material used for a woman's dress, or, from the mid 1930s, a perfume of that name by Parfum Weil de Paris, advertised with an image of a bottle laid against a background of black and white stripes, which might resonate in this poem and suggest an insignia of love and allure to 'strike out' more militaristically uniform stripes, as military brass is replaced by jazz saxophone. The invocation to music is intensified in two principal ways. Firstly, the objects of the landscape signify as a kind of large-scale musical score, read and performed by the wind that blows through it, such that the squares of the landscape appear as clusters of medieval musical notes ('neumes', which in some medieval music manuscripts are in quadrilateral shapes). Secondly, this music is intensified in the chorus of birdsong, culminating in the mythically-charged voice of the owl.

Pound's *Pisan Cantos* of 1948 provide a useful comparison. With what Davie identifies as his 'literally international' language, Pound observes, from the Detention Training Camp in Pisa where he was caged in 1945 on suspicion of treason, various birds (uncaged) perching on the barbed-wire fences, and it reminds him of a musical score. As the birds hop from one wire to the next, the score unfolds across a sequence of Cantos. Consider these excerpts from Canto 79:

with 8 birds on a wire
or rather on 3 wires, Mr Allingham
The new Bechstein is electric
and the lark squawk has passed out of season
[...]
5 of 'em now on 2;
on 3; 7 on 4
thus what's his name
and the change in writing the song books
5 on 3 aulentissima rosa fresca⁶

The Canto interweaves various mythological artefacts from the imaginary museum, including the *Odyssey*, Athene, Zeus and Capaneus, Helen of Troy, and Tellus, amongst others, along with a further narrative conveyed through its various Chinese ideograms.

Pound's danger from his imminent context is considerable; in spite, or perhaps because, of this, he ranges through his collection of imaginative memory. The spirit here is not exactly curatorial: the mythological and cultural artefacts are not present in the spirit of preservation, or instruction. There is, however, an elegiac distance between these imaginary artefacts and the living present; they are a kind of escape from, or alternative to that present.

If this is Pound at his most internationalist, it is useful to consider Roberts's poetry by way of comparison as, in Nigel Wheale's phrase, 'international-regionalist'.⁷ In this respect her comments about one of her husband's poems are illuminating. Rhys's poem 'The Good Shepherd (*translated from his own Welsh*)' remembers his childhood experience in Wales:

Go and spy on the sheep
My father would say
Before I went to school every morning

Today snow covers the ground
On field the sun shone
And the fat sheep cut the trodden patches

[...]

I scared the sheep
I bulged after
Through the gap to Old David's cow pasture

Teacher said I never polish my shoes. (*The Van Pool: Collected Poems*, p. 47)

Roberts corresponded with Alun Lewis about this poem, commenting that 'it has no flowing rhythm. Old Welsh poetry seldom had. It is clean, querulous, Chinese I should say if I hadn't read some of the 6th century Welsh poetry'. In reply Lewis stated that he didn't like the final line: 'Teacher said I never polish my shoes'; he felt it was unexplained, and too disconnected from the rest. She responded in its defence:

For me it is the perfect ending. It strikes a minor note and suggests a further run of thought. The fact that he was often a truant, dirty shoed. I'm very fond of Chinese poetry and see a lot of the translations of the same rhythm as the early Welsh.⁸

At first glance this seems like a simple pastoral poem, but there is also a degree of poetic defamiliarisation in its language, and Roberts's observations might return us in this respect to the translated status of the text, rendered into English from the poet's original Welsh. It further represents a modern poetry understood by Roberts in terms of ancient Welsh poetry, and at the same time in terms of Pound's translations from the ancient Chinese. At the close of her letter to Lewis she quotes, in the context of war and separation, the final lines of Pound's 'Exile's Letter' from *Cathay*, itself a translation from the poetry of Rihaku (Li Po): 'I call in a boy, / Have him sit on his knees here / To seal this, / And send it a thousand miles, thinking.'

On the relation of a different facet of Pound's China to his essay's theme, Davie continues:

Faced with a work out of the imaginary museum like Ezra Pound's translation (version, imitation, whatever) of the Confucian Classic Anthology of Chinese Poetry, our distaste for archaism is worse than useless; for the poet's achievement there is precisely in choosing now this, now that style from the English past in order to convey now this, now that mode of ancient Chinese sensibility. (p. 53)

In questions of style as well as substance, poetic modernism has much to do with the past and its representation. Rhys's '21st Birthday Issue' of *Wales* magazine, from December 1945, contains two translations from the *Taliesin*, by Robert Graves, 'The Blodeuwedd of Gwion ap Gwreang', and 'Câd Goddeu' ('The Battle of the Trees'), with the accompanying dedication 'Texts restored and rededicated to Angharad Rhys of Llanybri', Rhys and Roberts's daughter. Graves's work on these two poems was central to his broader poetics of myth in *The White Goddess*, serial parts of which had appeared in previous editions of *Wales*. Rhys placed Graves's frankly modernist reconstructions of ancient bardic texts after an essay by the architect T. Alwyn Lloyd on 'Post-War Building in Wales', in which Lloyd expresses the kind of qualified distrust of the architectural modernist project that would chime with Graves's thoughts about poetic modernism: 'In the right places there will be opportunities for "modernism" to use a current phrase, provided this is honest and clean-limbed, not a mere repetition of clichés, that are apt to become as hackneyed as the overdone traditional forms.' The same issue of *Wales* also contains a brief review by Davies Aberpennar of Roberts's 1944 *Poems*, which safely contains her experimentalism by outlining her 'engaging decorative skill' (my emphasis).

But Roberts was clearly not just being decorative. Eliot and Graves were both discomfited by aspects of her poetic language, but what appeared to them as a kind of recklessness of dissociative style is often on the contrary a synthesis of mythology and lived experience, of the distant and the local, of past and present. In January 1944 she wrote to Graves: 'Today we need more myth than ever: *but not blindly*, only in relation to its scientific handling, in its relation to today' (*Poetry Wales*, p. 59). She might also have said, only in relation to the specific mythography inhabited by the poet.

Of course, Roberts's attitude towards the quantity of myth that a poet should handle was not shared by dominant trends in British poetry written in English from the 1950s onwards, and this shift in attention is a central anxiety behind Davie's essay on the imaginary museum. Whilst Pound and Eliot were sufficiently well-established to continue rummaging in the myth-kitty, as Philip Larkin was to style it, *Gods with Stainless Ears* was Roberts's final significant published poem, and she and Rhys, along with many of their generation of 1940s modernists, fell into silence and obscurity, as the war itself also became an unfashionable subject. And yet, in their stylistic impertinences that troubled even their modernist antecedents, there is something of the 'betwixt-and-between' that is particularly appealing to a contemporary taste for the difficult, the seemingly dissociated, the etymologically complex, and for an internationalism that is rooted in the specific, a heroism in the domestic, and a mythology that is part of living experience rather than an exhibit in a museum, imaginary or otherwise.

¹ Donald Davie, 'The Poet in the Imaginary Museum (2)', in *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum*, ed. Barry Alpert (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), p. 53.

² Letter from Lynette Roberts to Robert Graves, 27 January 1944. The given text, unpublished in this form, is reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford, and the Estate of Lynette Roberts. A proportion of the Roberts and Graves correspondence is published as 'The Correspondence between Lynette Roberts and Robert Graves', in *Poetry Wales*, 19:2 (1983), 51–124, and I quote from this published source where possible.

³ Lynette Roberts, *Collected Poems*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p. 7.

⁴ Keidrych Rhys, 'The Curlew', translated from the Welsh of R. Williams Parry, in *The Van Pool: Collected Poems*, ed. Charles Mundy (Bridgend: Seren, 2012), p. 158.

⁵ Lynette Roberts, *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p. 25.

⁶ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (London: Faber, 1987), pp. 499–500.

⁷ Nigel Wheale, 'Lynette Roberts: Legend and Form in the 1940s', *Critical Quarterly* 36:3 (Fall 1993), 4–19 (5).

⁸ Quotations from the unpublished letters of Lynette Roberts to Alun Lewis, n.d. [1941], are reproduced by permission of the Lynette Roberts Estate.

Three Uncollected Poems

The Orange Charger

My sacred charge
On you will I spring
All joy and tenderness,
Whose song falls into the air
Like a shower of dew,
So pure, so fresh, it
Each time is heard.
Who sings late in the mornings,
Or in some strange way
When no other bird sings,
So that your voice is signalled out
For its willing ease to please.
When rain is drawn from the sky,
Days of it ...
And I sit all day at that window
This day and next ...
Watching that rain,
Then sharply on my senses
As a ray of light were it
To descend on me
Falls your sweet notes on me.
You small orange charger
Are no common bird,
And I place you here
Among the earlier birds of myth
As a single fortune which has been
Handed down to us,
Who loves to migrate
And not to migrate,
Or sits with wistful isolation
In the perennial springs of the Azores.
You, who are the bird
Of the warm steaming soil,
Of the scent of the rain,
Of quiet temperate days;
From your orange breast
A sweeter cadence was never heard.

Lynette Roberts

Spring

Spring rules the world with open wing
And leaves that sing vibrate the air
With birds so rare that man should fling
His stress of being aside to bear
The greater joy of King of Spring.

As from a lawn the ring dove flies
With soft silk sighs greets capricorn
Her breast the dawn with ruby eyes,
Stirs sound. Arise sun's May day born
While wood larks charm the petalled skies.

When streams seep out of hidden stone
And beelike drone and celandine
With crystal shine and undertone
Of yellow zone so well combine
To serve Spring's Equinox well known,

Then through the hedge with outgrown pace
He trails green traces on horns of light
The farm bull white of sacred race
With bindweed lace and aconite
Recalls a rite of age-long grace:

Disturbs the trout's rock-pooled display
And roundelay of gorselit birds;
As gay as words they fly with May
And stir the day's white blossomed curds
Then out to fields their nests survey.

You these observe: then migrants come:
With wingbeat drumming, geese, cuckoo,
Warblers too, swifts scissored hum
The frolicsome dogs, sheep and ewe:
See round this valley strife is dumb.

For in this valley Artemis walks
With Sparrow, Hawks, and Spring-like Dove,
She fills the grove with rain that talks
And greens the stalks of birch above
Attend these leaves: The Queen of Spring.

Lynette Roberts

You within the Enchanted Circle

This the legend like lake mist curling,
Round the barren heights of Hell,
Swamping man with bitter agony,
To the heel of Sawdde's pebbled shore,
The Lady of the Lake.

This the recurring theme and pattern,
As love and death descends upon our will,
She whose taste for individual freedom,
Divided her from others, and came,
Upon that Black Hill, yours:

Gave him, hand, love, and life.
Showed wit at a funeral: foresight at a wedding:
An acquired taste for rural bread:
And no love for locks or bolts:
His sweet demon lover.

Now as the monstrous season turns,
Thins the buttermilk of days,
Scouring his heart, and her mind:
At her command over the rippled lake,
At the third blow, turned,

Called her young heifer of flour white hide,
Bid her black bull calf 'Prydein come.'
All three dissolved into the wavering haze,
To her Living Grave and Lake of Birth,
Like midges in the air.

Like midges in the evening light
They stung and blocked his path;
He sent her combs for her sunflower hair
From his journey somewhere to new pasture:
Eyes watered like the sun.

Her flesh cooled like the evening pool,
Willows fell red on her shores,
Swallows stirred her gravel face,
Transcribed every act,
Fish fled from her side.

Lynette Roberts

Textual Notes to Poems

'The Orange Charger' was published in *Life and Letters*, 60:139 (March 1949), 232-33.

'Spring' was published in *Quarto*, 4 (Winter 1951), 15; and *Poetry (Chicago)*, 82:6 (September 1953), 322-23.

'You within the Enchanted Circle' was published in *Departure*, 1:1 [1952], 3. I have silently corrected Line 4: 'swadde's' to 'Sawdde's', the name of a small river originating at Llyn y Fan Fach. See Keidrych Rhys: 'When I step thimble heeled at an end of day / Sound of water Sawdde water pricks my ear, A spreading dynamo sheer over all stone'. *The Van Pool: Collected Poems*, p. 123.

A typescript of this poem is held in the Robert Graves archive at St John's College, Oxford. The following variations in typescript are reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford, and the Estate of Lynette Roberts:

Line 5: 'the Lake'; ts 'Fyn Fach'

Line 17: 'Thins the buttermilk of days,'; ts 'Under the chariot wheel of stars,'

Line 29: 'From his journey somewhere'; ts 'varied fields'

Line 34: 'Transcribed every act,'; ts 'Screamed and transcribed every act,'

Charles Mundye