

In Search of the Muse-Goddess: Creativity and Female Deities in the Work of Robert Graves

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The first draft of this work was written in 1993 and presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a B.A. (Honours) degree at La Trobe University (Bendigo). Many revisions to the original draft have been made in order to update the general argument for a contemporary audience. This version of the work will be delivered in book instalments during 2022 and will run to approximately 50,000 words (a sizeable increase on the work's original word count).

Chapter Three: Poet, Poetry and Muse-Goddess in the works of Robert Graves



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1. Modern Poets as Lonely Priests of a Long-Suppressed Ancient Religion

The phrase 'to woo the muse' relates to the poet's inner communion with the White Goddess, regarded as the source of truth ... The poet is in love with the White Goddess, with truth ... to be in love is also to hate.¹

The poet is a remarkable figure in *The White Goddess*; he or she becomes a symbol of the alienated Romantic or Modernist artist ill at ease in modern Western Culture. The true poet, Graves says, is a functionary in the true religion - to him matriarchal or at least matrifocal. The poet manipulates 'sacred' energies of a quite specific, communal, personal and divine nature. He or she is in touch with what Eliade terms 'the Real' or 'the sacred', that is the timeless world of 'being'. This characteristic of the poet is both personal and social, that is the poet needs to honour and respect the divinities of poetry personally, and needs to exist within a society that affords them communal honour and respect. Clearly, this is impossible in modern Western culture and hence arises Graves's pessimism for the future of poetry.

The poet, we are told, speaks a different language to that of profane or even monotheistic culture; a language of the imagination, embodied in myth and intimately connected with ritualistic consecration, aversive exorcism (the casting out of spirits of evil) and seasonal and life-stage celebrations.

Graves goes on to suggest that Westernised cultures as they now stand have no time for these traditional poetic roles. We have banished from general consciousness the gods and goddesses that the poet should look to for poetic inspiration. If poets were to adopt such roles as priests or priestesses of revived, or adapted, ancient religions, they'd be seen as spiritually and ideologically backward and quite probably untrustworthy and a little mad. Without a community of devotees prepared to honour the old gods in their prescribed way the poet is perpetually a sad priest or priestess standing alone in a long deserted temple.

Firth describes the passing away of the Melanesian gods/ancestor beings, and with them their sacred poet-priests, in his book on Tikopian polytheistic religion. We sense the same kind of sadness we encounter in Graves's vision of the modern poet:

By 1966 the temples had been completely deserted and allowed to fall into decay. Where once these impressive buildings stood, with their great posts and ridgepoles, only the merest vestiges remained. To one who remembered the multiplicity of rites in the many temples of Uta, the modern sight was a melancholy one.²

Similarly, the modern poet, Graves tells us, is like a stone age tribesperson adrift in a hostile modern world. He or she perceives things others in our culture are unaware of. Graves describes it as a strange faculty of almost supernatural perception. It is this faculty that allows the creation of true poetry. The poetic consciousness described in *The White Goddess* transcends time and place; it is a 'Universal Substratum' of consciousness, primordial and fundamental, supernatural and governed over by external spiritual powers.³ We think immediately of Shelley in his 'In Defence of Poetry':

We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling ... always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden.⁴

¹ Graves. W.G. op. cit. pg. 448.

² Firth, op. cit Epilogue, pg. 473. Perhaps one of the saddest descriptions in anthropological literature.

³ Graves. W.G. op. cit. pg. 24. The description of this 'inheritance' or 'sub-strata' goes beyond Jung's archetypes, since the mythic figures exist as a bridge between nature and the psyche. The festivals, celebrations, etc. listed seem to suggest to experiences of communal worship.

⁴ Shelley, op. cit. pg. 181.

Like the Romantic poets—e.g. Novalis, Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge, Keats and so on—and like Yeats, with his occult techniques for conjuring 'spirits', Graves sees the whole process of creating poetry as the outcome of a necessary, but difficult, process of spiritual regression.⁵

2. The Muse-Goddess at the Heart of a Long-Suppressed Ancient Religion

The male poet, since it is this figure Graves mostly comments upon, must outline his poetic vision from encounters he has with the Muse—defined throughout the text as various human incarnations of the Great Goddess (or Triple Goddess), which he believes belongs to a religion that precedes many modern spiritual traditions and comprises a major force in the 'sub-strata' of the human psyche.⁶ The Muse, then, functions as a kind of living 'hierophany' or sacred revelation to the poet; that is, she reveals 'the sacred' or 'the real' via a flow of magical emotional energy. Graves informs us, that this flow of *awen*, as pre-Christian Celtic bards and druids called it, or sacralised emotion, gives the poet the power to create, sing, recite and incant authentic poetry. The Muse, we are told by Graves, resides, as a kind of divine female spirit, in a woman the poet loves. True poetry, he tells us, is 'religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exultation and horror her presence excites.'⁷

This is not a simple love song, however, since to Graves the Muse represents 'truth' or 'wisdom', and the poet, in seeking out and honouring the Muse, must go through a series of spiritual crises or tests. The nature of these crises and tests is not methodically listed or detailed in the book, so we have to piece together evidence from various volumes of Graves's work. However, it seems that the Muse sets the poet various tasks to prove his devotion. These tasks involve: 1) learning to trust one's intuition by virtue of 'proleptic' and 'analeptic' thinking (i.e. having memories of both pasts one didn't actually live, as well as the future); and 2) relearning the ability to regress spiritually by following the laws of the Triple Goddess and completing whatever creative projects she gifts the poet.⁸ To honour the Muse is also to 3) give up comfortable but non-passionate love relationships.

In a sense, then, the poet must hand himself over to the Muse, whom Graves sees as the primordial symbol of pagan womankind.⁹ A poet must also 4) opt out of, as much as is possible, industrial urban society—which Graves suggests deadens the poetic instinct. Like the vision seekers of North American shamanic traditions, he seems to believe that a poet must live within the rhythms of the natural world as much as possible. Finally, 5) the poet must also think independently and remain free of all distorting modern ideological perspectives—including associations with literary schools or movements involving prescriptive ideological or religious stances. Graves writes:

To think with perfect clarity, in a poetic sense, one must rid oneself of a great deal

⁵ Graves, W.G. op. cit. pg. 12. [In the modern world, true poetry results from] ... 'an inspired, almost pathological reversion to the original language.' Priestly's brilliant work on Coleridge illustrates the sense of emotional and intellectual intensity necessary for this "regressive" state to be converted into magical poetry i.e. *The Road to Xanadu*. [Picador, 1978, London.]

⁶ Graves op. cit. pg. 447.

⁷ Ibid. pg. 14.

⁸ Ibid. pg. 439-41. Certain 'artificial aids' are listed in order to achieve this mode of thought; various intoxicants and oracular devices, for example. One might also seek out inspiration by spending time amidst the tree top fairies; *dryads*, *meliae*, *karyatides* (or 'maidens of Karyai'), *hamadryad* and the *heliconians* (associated with butterflies, springtime plants in flower, as well as the inspirational Muses of Boeotia and Olympus). Such actions may lead, Graves says, to inspiration by the Muse Goddess herself, though, of course, some *dryads* and *hamadryads* were believed to be male in gender.

⁹ Ibid. pg. 448. Other women, other goddesses are kinder seeming, they sell their love at a reasonable rate.'

of intellectual encumbrances, including all dogmatic, doctrinal predispositions: membership of any political party or religious sect or literary school deforms the poetic sense and (disrupts) the magic circle within which the poet insulates himself for the poetic act ... He must achieve social and spiritual independence at whatever cost, learn to think mythically as well as rationally and never be surprised at the weird azoological beasts which walk into the circle ...¹⁰

But these willed techniques do not in themselves produce authentic poetry. Rather, they function as a kind of complex purification rite, in which the process of spiritual regression is made possible. Unconscious forces then take over as an outer change of circumstances creates a psycho-spiritual crisis in which sacralised emotional and spiritual energies flood the poet. Often this crisis, according to Graves, results from the Muse playing a certain role. She will be fickle, distant and sometimes even rejecting of the poet. She may be sexually and emotionally independent, perhaps even polyamorous (in her love interests) and polygamous in her sexual habits. She will also be spiritually and socially rebellious—in many respects the *femme fatale* of modern myth, or the 'young witch' archetype described by the Jungians. Her unpredictability is a key element of the inspirational energy she gifts to the poet. New Millennium readers will, no doubt, have picked up that despite presenting in his works as a feminist of sorts, Graves, never freed himself completely of the patriarchal tendency to describe to women the nature of their inspirational and creative experiences, their literary duties, and their vocational pathways should they decide to become poets themselves.

There are problems, then, with Graves's analysis of female experiences of inspiration and creative practice. That some women have strong, perhaps inspiring, feelings about mysterious men (i.e. the phenomenon of the *homme fatale* or *male muse* for creative women, also called the 'Animus' archetype by Jungians) and that gay men and women have similar feelings about enigmatic and inspiring same sex lovers, is well known. However, such experiences were not, apparently, acknowledged as authentic inspirational experiences in terms of Graves's Triple Goddess religious theory and he did not attempt to outline a more representative theory concerning the role of 'love', in all its diverse forms, in triggering 'creative inspiration'. Having said that he counted Sappho as a true poet and argued against some critiques of her work arising out of patriarchal critical perspectives. Perhaps we can put down Graves's sometimes feminist, sometimes traditional patriarchal utterances about women poets as a feature of the times in which he lived. Regardless of that, I would suggest that addressing these issues in his poetic might result in important and worthwhile changes to his main thesis. It might also be enabling and closer to the lived experiences of poets down the ages, to outline the creative possibilities associated with inspirational love figures for heterosexual female creatives, as well as gay and non-binary creatives.

3. Assessing the Personal and Social Rewards Graves Links to Adherents of the Muse-Goddess Religion

Returning to Graves's thesis, however, just why the Muse must play the role ascribed to her, is, in the final analysis, uncertain. This uncertainty arises because the social value of the regressive state is not made specifically clear to us by Graves—perhaps because he was led astray, somewhat, by the tragic consequences of the 'sacrificial king' thesis he'd adopted from Frazer. However, from the various comments made in the text and elsewhere, we may speculate that Graves did, in fact, understand the 'ego death/rebirth' dimension to the tasks the Muse-Goddess sets poets. Graves says the poet must use poetry to 'tell the truth about himself and her [i.e. the Muse]'.¹¹ The truth-telling process,

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. 409, W.G.

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 444, W.G.

we are led to assume, is somewhat grueling and at times even painful. It seems to be designed—though this is not explicitly stated—to purge the poet of nefarious spiritual and emotional energies incorporated into his personality by way of his culture and his past. For example, and this is stated in various places by Graves, the Muse may reject the poet because he has been conditioned to desire control over women. She thus rejects the patriarchal values (perhaps derived from male monotheistic religious traditions) he unquestioningly ascribes to that run contrary to her own essentially pagan polytheistic moral code. Graves suggests that whenever the energy of the truth-telling crisis is present in poetry, raw primordial emotions are evoked:

The hairs stand on end, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine ... whenever one hears or reads a true poem.¹²

Nevertheless, on all this Graves is a little vague and evasive, and the sense that such emotional experiences lead somewhere definitive—i.e. are transformative in any kind of moral and personal sense—is not fully worked through in his work. Again, the idea that in the end the poet goes to his death—as Sacrificial King (from Frazer)—at the hands of the ‘dark executioner’, or other lover of the Goddess, perhaps encouraged in Graves a somewhat fatalistic attitude toward the social worth, and even personal worth, of poetry. One lives for a time in the poetic/creative sunshine afforded one by the Muse-Goddess, but one is ultimately doomed to degenerate in old age, or before, and vanish from the world leaving little of value behind.

In this reassessment of his work, however, I advocate for Graves’s elsewhere somewhat vaguely expressed hunch that the ‘ego annihilation’ experience suffered by the poet at the hands of the Goddess is, in truth, socially and culturally worthwhile and even healing. I adopt that position due to other evidence arising out of a range of beliefs about the arts held to by ancient and modern shamanic, animistic, polytheistic, etc. indigenous traditions. Suffice to say here, that the ancient Greek concept of ‘catharsis’ is the key to the position I’ll adopt regarding the personal and social transformative worth of the poet’s ‘personality restructuring experience’ at the hands of the Muse-Goddess.

Likewise, whether Western Romantic love dilemmas are central to the inspirational moment in archaic cultures needs to be questioned. The association of poetic inspiration with Fates, Muses, Fairies, Harpies, Valkyries and other female spirits across a wide range of archaic European cultures is, indeed, well known, as is the feminine element in the dramas of the so-called Orphic Mysteries as well as in the Courtly Love dramas of Medieval times. However, if the Muse-Goddess is, by definition, linked to ‘primordial womankind’ then why is Graves’s definition of her so infiltrated by Western Romance tradition ideals, as well as by Modernist-bohemian marriage and relationship ideals? Wouldn’t we do better to look at the actual roles and perspectives of women artists in historic and contemporary Indigenous societies? This problem I have labelled: ‘Who Exactly is the Muse-Goddess?’, and the question will be explored in depth in Chapter Four.

4. A Psycho-spiritual Bedrock to Authentic (i.e. Muse-Inspired) Poetic Experiences

Let us take a closer look at the specific emotions brought on by the Goddess’s seizure of the poet’s consciousness. Graves, at various times, describes the seizure experience in terms of ‘fright and lust’, ‘intense love or hate’, fear of, or actual, insanity; namely, states of emotional crisis containing extreme physical and psychological components. When we

¹² Ibid, pg. 24. Beginning: “The reason why the hairs stand on end ...” Also pg. 448. Graves’s vision of ‘The Naked King’ here closely parallels the symbolic ego death identified by anthropologists as associated in many primordial traditions with Shamanic initiation rites. In the Ancient Greek ‘aversive rituals’ dancing chanting women would represent spirits of evil (Ker). Harrison Ch. 5 op. cit. *Prolegomena*.

consider the Ancient Greeks and their tragic poets in Chapter Four, we will see that although Graves here specifies many of the characteristics of a God or Goddess possessed poet or muse, he in fact errs through underestimating the intensity and goal of the various emotional states triggered by poetry in many of the traditions he presumes to speak for.

The emotional power of the poetic experience is emphasised in most traditional languages. Invariably it is connected to ideas (and word roots) indicating violent seizure, divine possession, rage or burning sensations of love or passion. Such word roots are often connected with possession by male or female divinities, ancestors, or totemic beings. Odin-Wotan, the Anglo-Saxon God, for example, was derived from *Wut* or *woot* = 'fury' in Old High German; in Old English *wod* (an adjective), and in Old Norse *oor*, meaning 'furious'. Also, in Goedelic we have *Wods*, meaning 'possessed' and 'insane'. Related words are *oor* in Old Norse (i.e. 'passion' or 'poetry') and *wob*, or 'voice song', in Old English. In Latin the same associations are conveyed by root words like *vates*, 'god-inspired singer' and in Old Iranian we have *api-vatagati* i.e. 'spiritual stimulations'. Likewise, in Middle, Old High and Proto Germanic we have links between poetic inspiration and the word *brunst*, which means 'passion', 'ardor' and 'sexual arousal', similar associations exist in Middle Danish where root words signify 'furious', 'raving', 'violently desiring' and 'burning with love'. Such concepts are also part of the Old Norse word *geisa*, 'to rage' (i.e. with 'fiery passion'), and the Germanic root *sengw*, from the Indo Germanic *senguh*, meaning 'divine voice' and 'oracle'.

The connection between cathartic emotion, soul seizure or possession, dance, fury, passion, spirituality, song, ardor, being out of oneself, poetry, sexual love, oracular communications, trance states and divine intoxication is clear throughout the old European languages.¹³ In these traditions common human emotions are imbued with sacred energy and become vehicles for the mana of the gods and ancestors. In monist, monotheistic and transcendent traditions such emotions tend to be seen as ungodly, irrational, profane or egoistic, i.e. they threaten to undermine the possibility of an authentic relationship with the divine.

It is worthwhile briefly summarizing Graves's position in regard to different religious traditions. We note that each tradition is assessed according to its respect, or otherwise, for poets, poetry and poetic forms of knowledge. Underlying Graves's beliefs about the emotions properly indicative of the presence of the Muse-Goddess is a sense of uncanny awe linked to 'fright and lust' (as quoted earlier). The world tends to become lit up and expansive—in the visionary sense of 'mind expansion'—after the poet encounters a woman possessed by the 'Muse-Goddess'. Some of this almost magical energy may in turn be transferred into poems, songs, etc. created by the poet whilst under the Muse's sway. This sense of 'expansive awe' can then be transmitted to reciters, readers, listeners and other who encounter a 'true' Muse-inspired poem.

5. The Language of the Muse Goddess is Poetic: Overly Abstract Language is Symptomatic of an 'Unpoetic' Society

Arising out of the experiences outlined above, Graves theorized a suppressed, poetically authentic, 'language of the Goddess' (a language, quite literally, rotted in an archaic poetic tree alphabet). The considerations above also led him to contrast what he called the 'natural' humane way poets think and feel about the world, with what he called the unnatural 'synthetic' way scholars (and modern humanity in generally) thinks and feels about the world. He described our habitual modern way of thinking as a kind of disease linked to: a) the 'easily discountable thesis that cause necessarily precedes effect' and b) our addiction to excessively logical argumentation that is overly abstract and thus

¹³ I am indebted to Neumann for this list of derivations. In *The Great Mother*, op. cit. pp. 296-98.

divorced from the natural world.¹⁴ These problems with, in particular, scholastic modes of analysis he linked, in turn, to his larger Patriarchy v Matriarchy thesis. Pedantic scholastic critiques of his work quickly became symptomatic of arrogant masculine reason's desire to subjugate nature, womankind, poets and artists etc. to patriarchal modes of thinking, feeling, relating and existing/being.

The work itself questions the social value of adopting excessively rational, logical and scientific modes of analysis, and launches a scathing mythography-based attack on the origins and entire *modus operandi* of much of the Western philosophic tradition. Graves believed that as a discipline its founders had lied and cheated to prop up its position as the Queen of the Liberal Arts (by the late Medieval period). He begins by critiquing the early Greek philosophers, then moves on to later philosophers and their usually, excessively rationalistic systems. Philosophers—or what for him are worse, i.e. philosophers parading as poets—are introduced throughout the work with a kind of jocular invective. In another of his works, *The Crowning Privilege*, he broadens his critique to encompass various British poets overly-influenced by Enlightenment reason—effectively writing off an entire literary era! Pope in particular is stripped of his poetic medals:

Up the ladder went this sedulous ape, continually turning about to bite and scratch those below him.¹⁵

Such comments illustrate Graves's dislike of what he called the 'anti-poetic' ways of thinking encouraged and practiced by the Academy in modern Western nations. He tells us that the critical moment in Western cultural history was when Socrates turned his back on myth and mythic thought and 'disciplined his mind to think scientifically.' This 'religion of logic', developed by the early Greek philosophers during Greece's Classical Age, arose, according to Graves, out of patrilineal religious institutions already paramount—by way of Olympian polytheism—in ancient Greek society.¹⁶ This era saw male poets address poetry to Apollo (and other male deities) for the first time—a practice, according to Graves, 'that has prevailed practically ever since in European schools and Universities.'¹⁷

He describes the 'knowing' or 'wisdom' engendered in devotees by the Triple Goddess, as both 'analeptic' and 'proleptic', meaning intuitive, inspirational, symbolic, and, in a sense, magical, since these words denote the poet's ability to know things from the past that one didn't actually witness, and also know things about the future. Poetic forms of thinking are described as expansive, emotional, holistic and visionary, and lead to authentic communion with the natural world and other human beings.¹⁸ Poetic modes of perception also involve less alienated ways of relating to other human beings, to animals, insects and the plant kingdom.

Graves's remedy for Western civilisation's many ailments, then, contained elements drawn from remedies articulated in the late 18th and early-to-mid 19th centuries by poets and thinkers like Coleridge, Blake, Novalis, Wordsworth, etc. However, the matter of which religion or spiritual system to adopt to counterbalance the destabilizing socio-cultural forces unleashed by materialistic science and atheism led Graves to the religion of an era preceding the rise of patrilineal polytheism. Graves's spiritual remedy,

¹⁴ Graves, W.G. op. cit. pg. 343. On scholars pg. 25, beginning: 'And the scholars can be counted upon to refrain from any comment whatsoever...' Earlier quote: *ibid*, pg. 9.

¹⁵ Graves. *In The Crowning Privilege*, Lectures on professional standards in poetry. pg. 46. [Pelican, 1955, Middlesex.]

¹⁶ Graves-op. cit. W.G. Foreword pg. 9-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.pg. 10.

¹⁸ This is defined throughout the text Some instances where he is clear about it however are - W.G. op. cit. pg. 24-26; pg. 448-49; pg. 490. and Postscript', Ch. 27.

therefore, is much more radical than any forwarded by earlier Romantics, put simply: he advocated for the Religion of the Neolithic Goddess.

6. Graves's Critique of Spiritual States Linked to Patrilineal Societies: i.e. 'Unpoetic' Transcendent States

Graves defines the sense of sacred awe linked to the Muse-Goddess quite differently to the kinds of spiritual states experienced by what he terms 'patriarchal' visionaries, mystics, prophets, priests and philosophers, and overall we get the sense that devotees of the Muse-Goddess receive a visionary experience linked to elevated romantic and psycho-sexual emotions associated with an actual, or desired, female lover, that tends to re-animate and re-enchant the ordinary world. Put differently, the epiphany of the Muse-Goddess is 'female and immanent' rather than 'masculine and transcendent'. Samahadi, a monist Hindu visionary state, for example, is criticised by Graves as 'unpoetic':

It is a psychopathic condition, a spiritual orgasm indistinguishable from the ineffably beautiful moment, described by Dostoyevsky, which precedes an epileptic fit.¹⁹

One supposes Graves to be more sympathetic to the religious values expressed by the mythic tales and hymns of the *Rig Veda* (12th century BCE) than those expressed by more philosophic (monist) Hindu works linked to, for example, the *Advaita Vedanta* tradition, which were composed later. Graves also prefers ancient polytheistic Greek, Sumerian, Egyptian, Roman, Celtic and Germanic, etc. pagan religious traditions over Catholicism, but also, perhaps paradoxically, he prefers Medieval Catholicism over Protestantism. Finally, he seems to prefer almost any religious tradition over materialistic philosophies due to an aversion to the 'anti-poetic' and disenchanting rational philosophies that underpin Classical (or Newtonian-Cartesian) Science. His criticisms are directed at the tendency in transcendental religions to repress the powerful emotional forces provoked by the Goddess. Transcendence is transcendence of the 'passions'; though, as we will see with Graves's analysis of Plato's *Republic*, Graves himself seems fearful of giving emotional catharsis full reign and all-but ignores its structured healing function in archaic cultures.

Graves thus sees the ecstatic states induced in poetic devotees of the Muse-goddess as genuinely religious compared to the psychospiritual inauthenticity he sees as fundamental to patriarchal monotheistic (i.e. transcendent) encounters with divinity. The chief difference, I would argue, is that the expulsion of negative emotions or anxieties (via catharsis) is more clearly sacralised in the pre-monotheistic traditions, whilst this function is often suppressed and then demonised in transcendent monotheistic traditions. Put more simply: in the Muse-Goddess tradition stored up negative emotion is cathartically released via religious ceremonies, whereas transcendent traditions suppress and control such emotions via prayer, meditation, mantras, body-asceticism/hatred and other techniques and ideological inventions—e.g. the concepts of duality, original sin, temptation, etc.

Even though some monist and anthropomorphic versions of divine possession involve powerful emotional components to do with male gods or ancestors, it is rare, according to Graves, that such emotions will convert into magic-imbued poetry. Indeed, in *W.G.*, he critiques such traditions as originating in historic events that enabled militaristic 'warrior lords' degrees of political ascendancy that destroyed or mutated implicit power balances between the genders evident in the older polytheistic pantheons.

¹⁹ Graves, op. cit. pg. 484. *W.G.*

Male-dominated religions, according to Graves, are stripped of cyclic understandings of time (which were based upon nature and the passage of the seasons) and are doomed, despite their oft-pledged commitment to peacefulness, to endless strife and war.

To Graves then, transcendence of the flesh is impossible and amounts to a desperate attempt to avoid the immanent sacrality of the Great or Triple Goddess. I would add that, ultimately, an obsession with world-transcendence, represents the institutionalization, *en masse*, of dangerous levels of emotional repression/suppression. This is surely, also, a psycho-spiritual problem. What is required, I would argue, is our honouring the phenomenon of ‘catharsis’—structured emotional release brought on by poetry, art, literature, dance, music, etc.—i.e. the safe venting/release, and therefore healing, of one's pent-up negative emotions and frustrations. This position is only vaguely outlined by Graves, but I believe there are currents to his thinking that lead us in this direction.

We also note that the development of social fears and taboos around invoking the dead and the spirits of the earth, represent critical religious shifts from the shamanic, animistic and polytheistic experiences of divine afflatus to more masculine monotheistic experiences. In Lucan's *Pharsalia*, we note an interesting literary description of possession by Apollo of a Pythoness called Phemonoe (also a poetess in her own right, and the inventor of hexameter verses). Lucan's description accords with Deren's concerning voodoo possession rites, and many other descriptions of the same kind of experience reported in the ancient literature and by anthropologists in modern times:

... for the first time she experienced the divine afflatus, still active after so many centuries, and Apollo genuinely possessed her at last. He forced his way into her heart, masterful as ever, driving out her private thoughts and draining her body of all that was mortal, so that he could possess it wholly. She went blundering frantically about the shrine, with the God mounted on the nape of her neck ... the hair rose on her scalp and when she tossed her head the wreaths went flying across the bare floor. Apollo's fury was so fierce that fire seemed to boil from her mouth, he whipped her, goaded her, darting flames into her intestines; but at the same time kept her on the curb and prevented her from disclosing as much as she knew. Countless centuries crowded tormentingly in her breast; rival utterances. She understood all that was or would be, from the beginning of the world to its very end ... Phemonoe went on a distressing search through the fates of far more important men than Appius before she finally came upon his own. As soon as she recognised it, her mouth foamed frenziedly; she groaned, gasped, uttered weird sounds, and made the huge cave re-echo with her dismal shrieks. In the end Apollo forced her to use intelligible speech ...²⁰

This is certainly a very different kind of spiritual state to that aimed at by those seeking peaceful ‘world transcendence’, though no doubt Graves would place it in an interstitial zone between matriarchal and patrilineal forms of Greek polytheism (given Apollo, rather than a representative of the Muse-Goddess, is the presiding deity). However, it illustrates the belief that male gods and ancestors in traditional cultures gifted poetic (or, at least, ‘enigmatic riddling’) utterances to their human vessels; and not in the kind of stereotyped sedate, rational style that Graves rails against elsewhere. The Old Testament and the Koran also contain beautiful poetic passages, for example, linked to male divinities. The same is true in Indigenous Australian oral story-telling traditions, and with other primordial cultures in which male and female divinities and spiritual powers are often roughly in equal proportion.

Though this is a vast question, we can say that Graves is premature in attributing the language of poetry only to feminine deities. The crucial differences between poetic-

²⁰ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, Trans. Graves, [v. lines 165-89.]. Penguin, 1957, Baltimore.

positive and 'unpoetic' traditions, I suggest, is not so much to do with the gender of the 'inspiring divinity' as with institutionalised customs and laws that make the divine, or sacred, a transcendent masculine phenomenon only, as against an immanent multi-deity phenomenon. Problematic paradigms and religious and ideological traditions tend to make people fear and desacralise/disenchant large areas of their emotional life, whilst also positing that the body is naturally 'fallen/lesser', 'sinful' and 'prone to temptation and evil'. Finally, we might describe as 'unpoetic', and therefore problematic, those traditions that fear, despise, distrust and even seek to outlaw the unimpeded functioning of the creative Imagination – as expressed through a culture's love of music, drama, dance, art, literature, poetry, the various disciplines of the Humanities.²¹

7. The Forgotten Centrality of Catharsis, Love, Nature, the Body, Death and Emotion to Authentic Poetic Experiences

What Graves occasionally misses, with his somewhat ambiguous definition of the differences between patriarchal transcendental religious experiences and more primordial, visionary experiences, is the deeper significance of creative catharsis and its ability re-humanise and re-animate/re-enchant the world for individuals willing to undergo such an experience.

What we have in traditional religious cultures is an expanded notion of immanent divinity, and the sacralisation of nature, the land, relationships, emotions, the body etc. Human existence often mimics the divine existence of ancestors or gods—for example, that they had sex—means that it is healthy for humans to have sex; that they revel in their bodies sacralises the body for humans; that they laugh means that it is good to laugh and so on.²²

What is at issue for the poets is that the 'sacred', or 'numinous', in most patriarchal transcendental traditions is, as Anne Baring and Jules Cashford suggest, either severely narrowed or deferred into a realm unreachable in one's lifetime. It no longer partakes of the fabric of material life but splits away from it.

In the beginning the Great Mother Goddess alone gave birth to the world out of herself, so that all creatures, including the gods, are her children, part of her divine substance. Everything is living, animated—with soul—and sacred. Today's distinctions between 'spirit' and 'nature', 'mind' and 'matter', or 'soul' and 'body' have no place, for humanity and nature share a common identity. This was the myth that prevailed in Paleolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age Crete. It is still found in what are called (probably for that reason) 'primitive' societies and, of course, in poetry.²³

Graves suggests that some religions actually work to propagate the various splits in consciousness, others (more primordial traditions) set about healing them. To him all religions are not the same, either in goal or effect. The point is what causes and sustains

²¹ Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* [op. cit.] gives a useful historic summary of where some of these transcendental religious traits first began. The transcendental attitude to music in monist and monotheistic cultures, for example, is puzzling but ultimately negative. With primordial cultures, on the other hand, union of man and divinity *occurs* through mythic participation in musical, dramatic and poetic experiences. In Huxley's syncretic religion, music encourages emotion and emotion is part of the self 'which must be died to' (pg.255). Such religious nihilism only became commonplace amongst religious people after Plato succeeded in irreligiously stripping divinity of sacralised emotion. Chapters 11 and 12, of Huxley's book, concerning 'Idolatry' and 'Emotionalism' are also relevant. The monotheistic religious experience, he seems to suggest, tends toward 'desirelessness', 'non-attachment' and 'Holy Indifference.' (pg. 86) In terms of the traditional poetic experience, such psycho-spiritual states represent a kind of spiritual death.

²² Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess* (Viking 1993, London), discuss these issues well in Chapter 16: 'The Reunion of Nature and Spirit.'

²³ *ibid* pg. 660.

the various dualities of existence—man and god, spirit and flesh, mind and body, earth and transcendent reality? I hope that the ancient poetic remedy articulated in chapter four will throw some light on this issue.

In cultures with a greater balance of male and female spiritual principles, the numinous seems to be less mediated by priests, gurus and holy men professing future sacralisation and more a part of the here and now - that is experienced in one's work, one's experience of sex, one's experience of the simple body functions, one's experience of nature etc. We recall Blake's statements on the same in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell':

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive ... Till a system was formed which took advantage of and enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the Mental Deities from their objects - thus began priesthoods ... Thus men forgot that All Deities reside in the Human breast.²⁴

The Mythopoeic realm is thus all around us, animating all existence. We are back to the way we experience the world in our childhoods. Peacock and Kirsch describe the primordial world view as follows:

Perceiving no clear distinction between the ideal world of the Dreaming and the actual world of real life, the [Indigenous Australian] feels no need for saints or illuminati to mediate between the ideal and the actual ... the Dreaming has happened and everyday life is the Dreaming.²⁵

Thus the tendency in transcendent traditions to try and 'save' the person from the horrors of the material world and safeguard the person's soul for the sacralised 'beyond'—e.g. *heaven, Jannah, svarga loka, etc.*—become major differences between earlier Mythopoeic perspectives and later more transcendent ones. Similarly, concepts like *original sin, faith, salvation* (Christianity); *karma, samsara, nirvana* (Buddhism); *maya* (Hinduism) might be seen by Graves as conceptual tools enforcing the deferral of spiritually numinous from our everyday lives to other-worlds situated beyond ordinary existence. For our purposes we find elements of this accommodation to 'this world' disenchantment in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, certain monist strands of Hinduism, Confucianism and Platonism, among many other traditions.

Unlike Graves, I want to suggest that the crucial question in all of this is *What happens to the visionary and magical consciousness of the child?* For again and again poets and artists tell us that the numinous is natural to us at birth. Peter Matthiessen, in *The Snow Leopard*, describes beautifully the process by which we shut out the wildness of nature in early childhood:

And this debasement of our vision, the retreat from wonder, the backing away like lobsters from free swimming life into safe crannies, the desperate instinct that our life passes un-lived, is reflected in proliferation without joy, corrosive money rot, the gross befouling of the earth, and air and water from which we came ... But memories would come on wings of light - a shining bird, high pines and sun, the fire in a floating leaf, the autumn heat in weathered wood, wood smell, a child, soft lichen on a stone - a light filled immanence, shimmering and breathing, and yet so fleeting that it left me breathless and in pain.²⁶

²⁴ Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

²⁵ Peacock and Kirsch, pg.144. in *Human Directions*. [Prentice Hall, N.J. 1980].

²⁶ Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard*, pg. 47 [Chatto and Windus, 1979, London].

The sense of 'participation in nature' described in the above passage, epitomises the child's natural oneness with the everyday mysteries of existence. Transcendent and materialistic cultures, as Graves well knew, rarely acknowledge the spirituality inherent to the natural world, our ordinary lives and the animistic consciousness of children. However, distrust of emotions and the body gradually turns into a psychological malaise that can pervade all areas of a person's existence—revulsion, distrust, de-sacralisation, disenchantment, and so on can become daily symptoms of an essentially disenchanted existence. As an example, it is difficult indeed for non-Indigenous Australians, whether monotheistic-leaning or atheistic leaning, to truly empathise with Indigenous Australian views of the land as the abode of one's essential spirituality – non-Indigenous spirituality, where it exists at all, is almost entirely ignorant of the everywhere sacrality and numinosity of the very land upon which they live.

8. Graves Critiques the Patrilineal Monopoly on 'Spiritual Wellbeing': Religions that Banish the Feminine Carry a Metaphysical Illness

Graves claims that the poetic experience is 'rooted in love and desire', rather than the ascetic denial of emotion, bodily functions and relationships. He thus disagrees with the likes of Aldous Huxley, who says '[Supreme knowledge of the spirit] is attained by the denial of selfness in thought, feeling and action, toward desirelessness and non-attachment or Holy Indifference'²⁷

Likewise, the divine anger of Yahweh and his prophet followers is alien to authentic poets—however much it may be tempered by the occasional poetic elements we find in prophesy. There seems to be something problematic about monotheistic patriarchal processes of catharsis.

The mythopoeic religious experience addresses inner imbalances, to do with what we might call 'mythic evil'. It does not tend to scapegoat the natural world, womankind, the witch, the sexually diverse, and other convenient long-term 'sources of evil' in the way masculinist predominant religions tend to. Can we posit the anxieties and dualities we find in patriarchal and transcendent spiritual traditions as symptomatic of the presence of a kind of mass illness that began with the conflict between the feminine earth principle and the masculine sky principle 3,000 years ago? In Western and Middle Eastern history, the illness began with the defeat and demonisation of the Babylonian Goddess Tiamat by her great-great-great grandson Marduk.

The Hindu concept of *maya*, meaning the phenomenal world of illusion and suffering, illustrates a separate historic strand to the development of our proposed mass illness. *Maya* is really the Goddess Kali in her virginal aspect; she was called Maia by the Greeks (Virgin mother of Hermes), she was Maga to the Celts (Grandmother-Goddess) and bore the hero Cu Chulainn, she was also Almaya ("eternity", the "world" - i.e. partaking of the numinous) and Maj, the May Maiden of early Scandinavian pagan religion. In the Indo-European tradition then, the very concept of 'world transcendence' is founded on transcending a many-named Mother Goddess also associated with the word 'matter'. Post-Matriarchal religion then attempts—in the very act of naming—to transcend, diminish and obliterate the earlier immanent feminine understanding of the divine.²⁸

²⁷ Op cit. (1970, p. 86).

²⁸ Strehlow's work [op. cit. pg. 473-477] documents differences between Arandan and Christian ideas of sexuality. The Christian attitudes are seen as unhealthy to the Indigenous mind. If a god or ancestor spirit demands participation, increase, healthy sexual expressiveness, etc. then asceticism, denial etc. will be seen as a sacred sickness. In monotheistic and transcendent, patriarchal traditions the equation is reversed, and human passions, sexual expressiveness etc. become *the disease*. With regards to Tiamat see Baring and Cashford, op. cit. Ch. 7 'Tiamat of Babylon'. With regards to the etymology and religious history of *Maya*.

9. The Poet's Paradise: Muse-Goddess Sacrifices the Divine King at Harvest or Muse-Goddess Facilitates Psycho-spiritual Transformation?

Having teased out aspects of Graves's version of the spiritual experience he links to the Muse-Goddess (admittedly we have supplemented his perspective with research findings drawn from historic and contemporary Indigenous spiritual traditions), let us look more closely now at the ideal social milieu and purpose of poetry as he defines it. Whilst not being able to categorically define 'inspiration' once and for all, his definition does accord with the experiences of poets and artists in many traditional poetic cultures.

Graves's view contains a supernatural (and perhaps Romantic) understanding of the ways in which a poet is 'called' to the vocation. His entire theory is based on personal faith in the existence of the Muse-Goddess, as well as in her moral/ethical system and process of knowledge transmission. The words 'poet' and 'poetry', we've already noted elsewhere, have clear religious connotations for Graves, i.e. associated with worshipping the Triple Goddess:

Originally the poet was a leader of a totem society of religious dancers. His verse - versus is a Latin word meaning 'a turning' - were danced around an altar or in a sacred enclosure and each verse started a new turn or movement in the dance.

All the totem societies in ancient Europe were under the dominion of the Great Goddess, the Lady of the Wild things; dances were seasonal and fitted into an annual pattern from which gradually emerges the single grand theme of poetry: the life, death and resurrection of the spirit of the year, 'The Goddess's son and lover'.²⁹

The connection of the poet to primordial religious rituals is immediately apparent. But here we begin to encounter problems with the accuracy of Graves's late 19th to early 20th century archaeological and anthropological sources. It is certain now that this rite is not the only poetry-related rite found in primordial religions, though, as Graves says, some form of it probably goes back to the Old Stone Age. The problem is that the exact nature of 'some form' may force changes to his poetic theory. The rite Graves describes comes from Frazer's thesis of the Dying King, as outlined in *The Golden Bough*. In that work, a localized pre-Roman religious cult near Lake Nemi, worshipped a priest-king (i.e. Rex Nemorensis) who was periodically sacrificed by his successor. The king, according to Frazer, represented the incarnation of a solar deity, and was a dying and reviving god who also happened to undergo a ritualistic fertility rite and marriage to the goddess of wild places and the earth, i.e. Diana/Artemis. The 'sacred king' was ritually sacrificed during harvest (autumn) and reincarnated in early spring.

The Orphic mystery cults may or may not have incorporated elements of this pre-Roman myth into their ceremonies and liturgy. Graves's later recounting in *The White Goddess* of the true poet's necessary sacrifice at the hands of the female devotees of the Goddess, is a unique but problematic move, since the Rex Nemorensis was essentially a male political figure kept humble by his presumed subservience to the matriarchal order. Just how relevant is a political rite linked, possibly, to a local matriarchal political system—even if it could be proved to enjoy global currency as Frazer claimed—to the social psychology etc. of the world's poets, story-tellers, dramatists, artists, musicians, etc.?

Graves may have based his manoeuvre, however, on connections between the Nemi cult of Diana and the central story of the Orphic Mysteries, which has come down to our time in the form of the Orphic Hymns. The cult of the Orphic Mysteries was extant

see Walker op. cit. pg. 626-28.

²⁹ Graves, op. cit. pg. 422. [W.G.]

in the ancient world, in one form or another, between 800 BCE and 300 CE (approximately), and we note that the tearing to pieces of perhaps the supreme poet/musician of the ancient world, Orpheus, at the hands of maenads, i.e. women of the wilds (rather, women under the spell of Dionysus), was indeed central to the cult. Whether this 'rending' involved actual ritualised sacrifice/murder of a human poet/artists, however, is doubtful. The cult was closely associated with the rites of Thracian Dionysus, a god in no way original to Greece or even primordial religious traditions in general, but rather a product of an urbanising culture. Walter Wili describes him as follows:

He had brought wild ecstasy, dark terror, the ideas of guilt and atonement, condemnation and election ... concepts usually regarded as un-Greek. He also brought the orgiastic cult of the Bacchantes and the Orphic mysteries.³⁰

Put simply, is Dionysus (also a God of poetry and music), and therefore the rites of sacrifice associated with him, a later mythic accretion that links the ritual 'rending to pieces' associated with the Orphic cult to later forms of patriarchal polytheism (rather than matriarchal polytheism?) Regardless of our conclusion on that front, we do know that Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Palestinian mythologies also developed unique local 'rending' myths, often, as with the Nemi Diana cult, to do with political rulers. Here again, however, proof of ritual sacrifice is difficult to establish, and proof of rending/sacrificial myths involving poets and other creatives is even less evident.³¹

Jane Harrison, after studying early Greek religious ceremonies, however, noted the symbolic tearing to pieces of young men at the hands of various Keres, or spirits of evil and violent death. Such ceremonies, however, often marked the young person's entry into adult life.³² In *Themis*, Harrison suggested similarities between Orphic and Dionysian rites and Indigenous Australian puberty rites (the rending spirits being called *Mamu* by the Pitjantjatjara of Central Australia).³³ Both traditions engineered a kind of spiritual rebirth by returning youths of a certain age to their divine origins—i.e. to the divine mother. The Keres, or evil spirits, were often male elders dressed up for the occasion. Such traditions represent, certainly, a cathartic, possibly terrifying experience, in honour of a certain aspect of the Great Goddess, but here we are not dealing with a physical 'tearing to pieces', such as Frazer often pointed to, rather such rites engineer a symbolic process of ego-destruction/annihilation for the young men, followed by a 'realignment of the self' so that it can take up its position in the adult world.

We also need to consider Mircea Eliade's studies of global shamanic traditions, in particular his descriptions of the initiatory experiences of shamans in a range of cultures. The larger religious paradigms that shamanic traditions are linked to often correspond with the primordial religious paradigms Graves would associate with his archaic 'Religion of the Goddess'. In Eliade's work we encounter global evidence of 'rending/tearing to pieces' narratives at the very heart of a shaman-poet's initiation process. However, political motifs to do with a 'dying king/solar deity', as well as

³⁰ Olga Froebe-Kapteyn, ed. *The Mysteries*. 'The Orphic Mysteries', [Princeton, University press, 1971, N.Y.]

³¹ S. Hooke, *Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*; [Pelican, 1968, Middlesex.] R.T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* [Thames and Hudson, 1978, London] and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World* [Anchor Books, N.Y. 1961.] all give useful readings of the various mythologies listed. In most Mother and Son form the basis of the myths. Egypt, in part, is an exception.

³² Harrison. Jane, Ch. 1 'The Hymn of the Kouretes', in *Themis*, op. cit. pg. 15-27. We note here that the 'cannibalistic rite' ascribed by Graves to the Goddess was originally a puberty rite and thus it was primarily symbolic/metaphoric in function and enactment. This was not always clearly understood by Graves when he transferred Frazer's understanding of the 'sacrifice of the sacred king' rite across into his new poetic of Poet and Goddess. Also, please note that *Mamu* = the dangerous evil spirits, as quoted in Larrington, *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* [Pandora, 1992, London. pg.253].

³³ op. cit. pg. 18, *Themis*.

evidence of the ‘ritual sacrifice’ of shamans at specific times of the year is scanty. According to Eliade, common features of shamanic initiation experiences across numerous traditions are as follows:

...the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman’s vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection. Viewed from this angle, any “sickness-vocation” fills the role of an initiation; for the sufferings that it brings on correspond to initiatory tortures, the psychic isolation of “the elected” is the counterpart to the isolation and ritual solitude of initiation ceremonies, and the imminence of death felt by the sick man (pain, unconsciousness, etc.) recalls the symbolic death represented in almost all initiation ceremonies.³⁴

Expanding on the above schemata later in the chapter, Eliade writes:

...these first ecstatic experiences always include one or more of the following themes: dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the internal organs and viscera; ascent to the sky and dialogue with the gods or spirits; descent to the underworld and conversations with spirits and the souls of dead shamans; various revelations both religious and shamanic ...³⁵

Given apprentice shamans are being initiated into an essential vocation it is obvious enough that the ‘dismemberment’, ‘death’, ‘resurrection’ etc. motifs they experience during initiation represent symbolic rather than actual, physical experiences. Eliade thus alerts us to is the requirement that trainee shamans in many parts of the world undergo a radical re-ordering of their personalities in order to practice their profession efficiently. This re-ordering/reconstituting of the self involves ego-extinction/symbolic death and rebirth experiences that see the shaman journey to supernatural other worlds to gain knowledge, skills, etc. We also note that in some shamanic traditions—notably the Buryat and the Teleut—the souls of initiatory shamans are married to ‘celestial’ or otherworldly wives (or husbands in the case of some female shamanesses). These celestial marriage partners then become helpers and guides on earth once the new shaman takes up professional duties. Tellingly, Eliade concludes his commentary on the role of ‘Female Tutelary Spirits’ in Siberian shamanism with these words:

The protection given the Siberian shaman by his *ayami* resembles, as we saw, the role given to fairies and demigoddesses in the teaching an initiation of heroes. This protection undoubtedly reflects ‘matriarchal’ conceptions. The Great Mother of the Animals—with whom the Siberian and Arctic shaman is on the best of terms—is an even clearer image of the ancient matriarchy.³⁶

Clearly, shamans in traditional cultures have to learn a great number of songs, charms/enchantments, dances, narratives, etc.. Consequently, can we suggest that their initiation experiences, as well as the social requirements they must meet to demonstrate ‘continued vocational effectiveness’ more closely resemble the experiences and vocational requirements of ‘true’ poets and other artists linked to Graves Religion of the Goddess? In the case of the Siberian shamans of course the link between shamanic initiation and the matriarchal values of the Great Goddess has been proven. Likewise, then, might we reasonably replace Frazer’s localized, perhaps later, myth-narrative of the ‘rending/tearing to pieces’ of a sacred priest-king with a more genuinely global archaic

³⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, pg. 33. Arkana, 1989.

³⁵ Ibid, pg. 33.

³⁶ Ibid, pg. 81. For full discussion of ‘female spirits’ and Siberian shamanic initiation processes ibid. pp 75-81.

narrative, as outlined by Eliade, involving the symbolic initiatory ‘dismemberment and resurrection’ of shaman-poets as a necessary precursor to becoming a true poet?

I suspect that Graves was either unaware of, or under-emphasised, the personal and communal importance of some of the alternative primordial ‘rending to pieces’ rites and narratives we’ve been discussing. Perhaps this was due to his long-term commitment to Frazer’s more literal interpretation of the Nemi cult’s rites. However, though at times Graves seems to follow Frazer in universalizing the existence of actual physical ‘rending’ rites in primordial traditions, at other times, he seems to adopt a more metaphorical (or should I say ‘cosmological’) perspective, by suggesting that the rites represent the psychological facts of human existence, i.e. we are born and are raised to adulthood; we struggle, we love and perhaps raise children of our own; and then each of us must come to terms with physical frailty and, eventually, our own mortality (or final ‘rending’ apart experience). For someone who saw thousands of young soldiers literally ‘torn to pieces’ on the battlefield, it is entirely understandable that the violence and drama of Frazer’s fundamental myth might represent some sort of fundamental truth, about both human nature and the nature of the cosmos, to Graves. However, in primordial traditions there were clearly other socially useful functions linked to the ‘rending to pieces’ drama. Apart from life-stage initiation ceremonies and professional (shamanic) initiation rites, another socially useful function existed linked to periodic rites of catharsis and psycho-spiritual healing. This function is, I would argue, closely aligned with the symbolism we encountered in Eliade’s descriptions of shamanic dismemberment and rebirth, though on this occasion it is experienced, largely, by audiences watching or embedded in intense dramas. As with the puberty rites and shamanic initiation explanations, Graves, largely, misses this extra archaic dimension to the idea of being symbolically torn to pieces/sacrificed.

There is then, ample evidence that shamans, village healers, and so on in myriad cultures knew how to engineer rites of emotional cleansing involving various kinds of symbolic ‘ego death’. The goal of such soul healers was to facilitate positive processes of psycho-spiritual transformation. Acknowledging these facts allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ‘true’ poet’s experience of ‘rending’ at the hands of the Muse-Goddess. In fact, we begin to appreciate more thoroughly the purposes of the rites of Lamentation carried out by Plains Indians, as described by Black Elk.³⁷ Confronting the Keres in Ancient Greece, was understood to give initiates tremendous spiritual power. Both of these traditions enacted a symbolic death and rebirth encounter with the Great Mother archetype.

10. Do the Academic Inaccuracies in *The White Goddess* Undermine the Book’s Central Argument?

Graves obviously picked up from Frazer certain useful truths about the link between the cyclical nature of life and suppressed female divine principles—truths that also proved inspirational to his poetry. However, the functions and symbolism of the ‘rending to pieces rite’ in primordial (pre-monotheistic) traditions turns out to be more complex and nuanced than Frazer described it in *The Golden Bough*. I believe that this led to certain tensions and even omissions in Graves’s understanding of the Poet-to-Muse-Goddess relationship (as outlined in *The White Goddess*).

The issue here is a certain sense of simplification and generalisation (derived from inadequate—by the mid-20th century—anthropological sources) in summing up poetry’s role in primordial, or at least, pre-monotheistic cultures. It is unfair to critique Graves too excessively, however, on these issues, for more often than not the groundbreaking nature of his methodology and argument leads us in the right direction. It took real courage to

³⁷ Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, pg. 44ff. [Penguin. 1973.].

challenge smug scholastic traditions and positions on history that were, in retrospect, firmly rooted in monotheistic and patriarchal paradigms. His attempts at a cross-discipline synthesis of data that others were (and still are) afraid to connect deserves our admiration, even though certain mistakes were made. The evidence seems to suggest that Laura Riding's intellectual courage also played an important part in realizing this synthesis, at least up until her split with Graves in the late 1930s.

Likewise, necessary as it is, it is not easy to reconstruct the authentic spiritual world view of Neolithic and Bronze Age human beings. What is certain however is that cultures displaying relatively unbroken lineages back to ancient times often use poetry, music, dance and story in more expansive ways than that described by either Frazer or Graves.³⁸ In Chapter Four I hope to provide some updated observations on the roles of poet, poetry, female deities/ancestor beings, etc. in such anciently continuous traditions.

11. Summary: Graves's Version of the Authentic Archaic Poet *versus* the Historical Facts

Let us summarise here the more or less correct elements in Graves's arguments about poetry's primordial function.

The poet's role as sacralised priest reciting poetry in honour of immanent divine forces, some of whom are female, fits loosely with anthropological evidence gathered from numerous pre-monotheistic cultures. Likewise, the poet's role in maintaining the human side of the divine bargain whereby nature, humanity and divinity coexist in a kind of balance fits the available evidence—poets were never merely 'entertainers' in such cultures. The sense that mythic poetry and religious ritual work together in Polytheistic and Animistic societies to consecrate and seasonally purify one's personal life, as well as aspects of communal life, is suggested by Graves, and again the insights fit the available evidence.

Although his central poetic rite is culture specific—Greek circa 700BCE—nevertheless, myriad forms of the myth, if not the rites, existed in various primordial religious traditions, and though the rending of a God-King at the hands of the Mother Goddess and her swarthy ally/lover may have taken a physical sacrificial form in some locations, the evidence of numerous ancient religious traditions, suggests that we need to adopt a much more nuanced understanding of both the myth's and the rite's functions, enactments and meaning. At least two alternative interpretations of 'rending rites' were offered above that roughly accord with the anthropological and historic evidence. We may thus agree with Graves that some kind of 'rending' or transformational experience may indeed be central to ancient understandings of inspiration and creativity, but shall have to disagree with Frazer's more limited interpretations of the 'tearing to pieces' ritual. We shall also agree with Graves that modern societies, on the whole, favour rational, logical and abstract forms of thinking and passing on knowledge, and routinely dismiss and undervalue poetic and mythopoeic forms of thinking and passing on knowledge.

Graves suggests that poetry comes to poets from a realm of perception alien to our modern materialist reality paradigms (as well as the paradigms associated with the world's three major monotheistic religious traditions). The truth or otherwise of his claims is, however, difficult to ascertain, but certainly, few modern poets (or even writers and artists) claim to receive poetic gifts from supernatural female entities resident in

³⁸ Strehlow op. cit.; Levy-Bruhl; op. cit.; Deren, *The Voodoo Gods of Haiti* [Thames and Hudson, London, 1970.]; Firth, op. cit. All expressly show the role of poetry in cultures close to Graves's ideal. To read these authors is to marvel at the Indigenous person's reverence for sacred poetry—it was valued above all material endeavours because within its boundaries there existed an entire system of knowledge preservation and recall crucial to the survival of communities. Traditions of poetry, song, dance and story-telling were tied up with the phenomenon of 'primary orality'.

another dimension of being. Nevertheless, Graves's understanding of where poems and songs come from undoubtedly parallels beliefs held to by poets, shamans, musicians, story-tellers, etc. operating in a range of primordial cultures—both modern and historic. Eliade, Harrison, Frazer, Levy-Bruhl and many other anthropologists, mythographers, etc. have documented the complex ways the sacred world is believed to penetrate, and manifests in, the mundane world for people embedded in cultures that still honour primordial cosmologies.³⁹ Westerners, typically, do not believe in alternative supernatural realities (due to the fact that most of us hold to the Cartesian-Newtonian—i.e. classical scientific—reality paradigm) and consider their disbelief a sign of psycho-religious 'progress'.

On the issue of where poetry comes from, Graves is true to his commitment to an archaic religion of the Muse-Goddess. However, he also develops ideas evident in many 19th century Romantic and Neo-Romantic poets, writers, musicians, artists, etc. The poetic outlined in *The White Goddess* is, in truth, a kaleidoscopic amalgam of these two streams of his thinking. Although he doesn't describe overly the nature of the 'other realm/world' (or 'realms/worlds') that might underpin his Muse-Goddess religion, it is clear that he believes there to be some sort of traffic between the realms of the Triple Goddess and the mundane realm of humanity. The otherworld's various deities, dryads, nymphs, monsters, fabulous beasts and creatures, demons, etc., however, can routinely disrupt an individual's life-world, via magically significant experiences, coincidences, relationships, etc.

Before we take a look at the roles ascribed to poets, poetry, creativity and the imagination in modern and postmodernist societies, we need to discuss several dimensions to W.G. that usually evade comment but are central to the overall impact of the work on readers.

³⁹ Levy-Bruhl, op. cit. pg.16. "For such ... minds as these, the supernatural world is ever at hand, ready to shoot up into consciousness at the slightest prompting."