

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 have been made to the original draft 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).



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Chapter One: Introducing *The White Goddess* and the Archetypes of 'Poet' and 'Muse-Goddess'

Summarising the Historical Thesis at the Heart of *The White Goddess*

The earliest draft of *The White Goddess* was written by Robert Graves—the English poet, novelist and mythographer—in 1946. Various other editions appeared up to 1960, at which point the text was expanded and modified into its final form. The work is described by Graves as 'an historical grammar of poetic myth', which he claims is unique as a literary genre and which, he tells us, 'has never been attempted before.'¹

What Graves exactly means by this definition of his book is revealed as the text proceeds. To begin with he wants to provide for poets a kind of textbook covering important aspects of their mythic and symbolic heritage. One aspect of this heritage is the importance of 'the Theme' to poets, and he argues that its elements transcend all ages and cultures, even though it has been suppressed and neglected in modern Western societies addicted to highly rational, logical and factual forms of knowledge transmission.² The book's central thesis—from which the other thematic expansions of the book begin—concerns the true nature of poetry: its inspirational sources, its personal function, its mythic and magical qualities and its true social function. At the core of Graves's argument is the belief that poetry proper, belongs to archaic levels of socio-religious and cultural organization, as well as archaic levels of the human psyche. The individual wishing to write true poetry in our modern age must return—or regress—to a kind of primordial bedrock of existence.

My thesis is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon Goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry—'true' in the nostalgic modern sense of 'the unimproveable original, not a synthetic substitute.'³

Then follows an historic summary of the processes by which this true language of poetry fell from grace in Western Culture. *The White Goddess* deliberately sets the poetic spirit apart from most of the values of modern civilisation, including, for our purposes, those of modern literary criticism. Graves's thesis, as quoted above, is applied in the text to the most abstruse and wide-ranging historical, psychological, theological and mythological material imaginable and at times it is difficult to track his core argument amidst a plethora of illustrations, asides, textual jumps, and so on.

Reassessing *The White Goddess* by Engaging with New Research on Ancient Poetries

This study will seek to reassess and clarify Graves's understanding of poetry and poetics, as well as the metaphysics underlying his proposed 'religion of the Muse-Goddess'. We will attempt our reassessment in the light of new research drawn from a variety of disciplines impacting directly on his arguments, but also in the light of recent developments in the field of 'poetics'. We will be especially interested in his argument that modern poets must regress to earlier forms of religious and cultural organization if they are to write authentic poetry. Similarly, in what ways, specifically, *can* poets

¹ R. Graves, in *The White Goddess* [Faber 1986, London], pg. 9 (hereafter cited as W.G.).

² Ibid, pg.21

³ Ibid, pg. 10

existing in what Graves calls 'anti-poetic' cultures, regress to the original world view of ancient and Indigenous traditions? Is regression even possible today? Also, what exactly did the concepts like 'inspiration', 'poetry' and 'poet' mean in the cultural traditions Graves used as foundations for his argument? Again, new research may provide us with some answers to these questions.

We will also explore Graves's idea that 'Muse-inspired poetry' must be central to a poet's and a culture's way of experiencing the world, if some degree of personal and spiritual health is to be secured. Such an idea implies a poetics, specifically an 'Origins' or 'Foundational' poetics, that we can compare with other Origins poetics forwarded by poets and artists working in similar spaces. The Origins poetics of Clayton Eshleman, for example, is of particular interest, since it pushes the 'back wall' of the human imagination back to the cave art of Paleolithic times. Likewise, the diverse primordial poetics one encounters in books like *Technicians of the Sacred* and *Shaking the Pumpkin*, both edited by Jerome Rothenberg, are of interest here. We note that Rothenberg was a key founder of the discipline of 'Ethnopoetics' which specifically looked at ways to enhance dialogue between modern Western poets and the poets of ancient civilisations as well as the poets of contemporary Indigenous cultures.

Graves's critiques of modern poetics, requires us to contrast the roles ascribed to poets (and the poetic) in modern society, with their assigned roles in traditional cultures. We will see that Graves points to specific deficits in both the assumed role of the poet and the metaphysics behind most modern poetry movements. However, is Graves's thesis universally relevant or does it only work for the ancient European traditions he uses to illustrate his arguments? We embark on this journey of discovery well aware of the many difficulties involved in summing up the immense variety of religious and social uses for poetry held to across the world's many and varied ancient and contemporary Indigenous cultures.

However, this variety is not quite so daunting as it first appears. There are certain consistent principles associated with the role of poetry and the poet held to across numerous primordial cultures. Given Graves sees cultures that view the cosmos in terms of animistic, shamanistic and polytheistic (particularly 'matriarchal polytheistic') paradigms as offering fertile soil for 'authentic poetry', we too can concentrate our analysis on cultures roughly aligning with such paradigms. Understandings of 'poet' and 'poetry' held to (loosely) in these traditions do indeed contrast sharply with the materialist/scientific and atheistic understandings dominant in the modern Western world, but also with understandings arising out of patriarchal Monotheistic and Monistic traditions. The paradigms just listed will dominate our discussion, since distinctions between all of these paradigms are relevant to our goal of exploring both the strengths and weaknesses of Graves's thesis.

To pre-empt my conclusions in this work somewhat, I will suggest throughout that although modifications need to be made to some of Graves's key conclusions about, let us call it, the 'primordial role of Poetry, Poets and the Muse Goddess in human societies', nevertheless the spirit of the work's underlying argument is largely correct. As we progress through our explorations of *The White Goddess*, let us also take time, then to define certain traditional understandings and definitions of the 'Poet', 'Poetry' and 'Poetics' as precisely as possible, acknowledging, where-ever necessary, our confusion and puzzlement.

Correcting Errors Discovered in Graves's Sources

Graves's poetry, though displaying clear Modernist elements, nevertheless harked back to themes explored by nineteenth century Romantic and post-Romantic poets. Like the Romantic poets, Graves saw poetry as an important barometer for assessing social and cultural well-being. His idealization of nature and country life, as well as his faith in a

unique (though in his case hybrid) spiritual system with accompanying symbol system based in large part on natural phenomena remind us of themes beloved of the great Romantic poets.

His prose writings on primordial poetics, however, were influenced by a number of groundbreaking mid-19th to mid-20th century mythographers, anthropologists, archaeologists, folk lore specialists, etc., for example, Jane Harrison, Sir James Fraser, Margaret Murray, Edward Davies, R.A.S. Macalister, Lady Charlotte Guest, Johann Bachofen, to name but a few. Some later scholars have had difficulties with Graves's arguments in *The White Goddess* due to the generalizing way he sometimes approaches ancient European and contemporary Indigenous traditions. Sometimes, however, the issues arise out of inaccuracies evident in some of his key source texts—some of which were already dated by the time Graves was making use of them to bolster his theories. We will try to clarify and update research on some of these issues in this study.

Another aspect of this reassessment of Indigenous perspectives on poetry is the need to explore more deeply the characteristics of the transformative experience that primordial and indigenous poets undergo in the name of the Muse-Goddess (and other relevant supernatural powers and entities). The chief areas of reassessment, I believe, relate to: a) the role ascribed to emotional catharsis in primordial traditions; b) whether Graves's Western post-Medieval Romantic love ideals involving 'unrequited love'/'limerence' are in fact central to the poet/Muse relationship in primordial traditions. Also, c) Graves sometimes has a tendency to gloss over, simplify and generalize about links in traditional cultures between written poetry *and* performed poetry involving dramatic, musical, dance and art elements, as well as communal ritualistic elements. Finally, I feel that Graves had little to say regarding the poet's role in controlling what we might call suffering and the problem of evil as experienced by individuals. However, primordial and Indigenous traditions placed poetry, dance and music at the heart of healing responses to a range of psycho-spiritual maladies.

This exploration will both point out, and in some cases modify, some of Graves's more problematic assertions and silences on these issues.

Certain epistemological difficulties arise as a consequence of Graves's critiques of modern communication and knowledge transmission systems, that are not always solvable. For example, when modern people speak of 'poetry' and the 'poet' we may not immediately think of a Goddess religion, magic, polytheistic and primordial deities or ancestor figures, the possibility of emotional and spiritual healing, the necessity of religious rituals, the primacy of the imagination and symbolism, and so on. Since Graves's chief concern in *The White Goddess* was with the ways in which poetry's 'cultural sphere of influence' had altered for the worse down the ages, we will need to be intellectually agile as our analysis moves through numerous understandings of these words in a range of ancient and indigenous cultural traditions.

Recall, also, that even in post-traditional Westernised societies, our understandings of words like 'poet', 'poetry' and 'poetics' have not remained static over the past two centuries. Postmodern poetics, for example, with its problematizing of the relationship between linguistic representations of reality and reality itself formulated new meanings for 'poet', 'poetry' and 'poetics' that undermined Modernist understandings of these words. Similarly, Modernist notions of poetry, established through the Symbolist, Imagist and Objectivist movements, in particular (and associated with Free Verse, a poetics of heightened individualism and increased tolerance for experimentation), critiqued and overturned many elements of Romantic and Gothic-Romantic definitions of poetry, the poet and poetics, and so on, down the ages.

The idea that poets in many traditional cultures are in some way sacralised, and that through their sacralisation, they help to maintain psycho-spiritual harmony within individuals, between individuals and their cultures, and also between their cultures and the cosmos, will emerge as a major theme in this study. The poet's role in such societies

is understood as both literary (though sometimes ‘literary’ pertains to traditions of ‘primary orality’) and religious in scope. It is also understood as potentially medicinal: by which I mean that it is believed that the poet in these traditions is believed to be able to assist with various types of psycho-spiritual healing on various levels. This aspect to primordial poetries is not specifically dealt with in Graves's book, but several groundbreaking later essays on the therapeutic (rather ‘self-therapeutic’) dimensions to Graves’s engagement with the Triple Goddess through poetry and writing, generally, will be emphasised in our investigation.

Two Archetypes: The Psycho-History of ‘Poet’ and ‘Muse-Goddess’

Like Graves, I will argue that the archetype of the poet changed significantly after the High Middle Ages, since from that period on, many of the ancient dimensions to ‘being a poet’ dropped away or were altered in significant ways. Whether what I believe was deleted from the ancient Poet archetype matches Graves’s list of deletions will, I hope, be interesting for readers to assess.

However, for our purposes, we will be tracking, in Jungian (psycho-historical) fashion, changes to a discernable ‘archetype’ associated with the idea/image of the ‘poet’ in cultures from many lands, eras and operating in reference to a range of spiritual and philosophical paradigms.

The other archetype we will be tracking (in terms of motif changes and narrative developments, suppressions, renaissances and eclipses) is, of course, the Triple Goddess that Graves’s book is named after. In particular, we are interested in historic changes (i.e. narrative alterations and motif additions or subtractions) to this archetype’s relationship with poetry, poets and other types of arts and artists. Erich Neumann, Carl Jung, Marija Gimbutas, Joseph Campbell, Cashford and Baring, and many others have done pioneering work already in this area, but we will need to keep the analysis focused on ancient female deities occupying important creative, literary, knowledge transmission and preservation, etc. roles in their cultures. Figures like Brigid, Rhiannon and Cerridwen (in Celtic pagan traditions), Seshat (in the ancient Egyptian tradition), Saraswati (in Hindu culture), the Muses, Athena/Minerva and Hecate (in Ancient Greek and Roman culture) and Green Tara (in Buddhism) immediately come to mind.

Our exploration of Grave’s thesis, as outlined in *The White Goddess* and his smaller work, *The Black Goddess* (and also in Laura Riding’s work *The Word “Woman”*, which likely represents an earlier, and quite unique formulation, of some of the arguments developed by Graves in *The White Goddess*) represents an attempt to up-to-date and offer relatively accurate descriptions of changes to the archetypes of ‘Poet’ and ‘Muse-Goddess’ (including changes to notions of ‘the poetic’ and ‘poetry’) across the millennia. Our conclusions may even give rise to further speculations regarding the causes of these archetypal changes. We will then seek to contrast Graves’s ideas regarding the Poet and the Muse-Goddess in ancient and Indigenous cultures with modern understandings of ‘poetry’, ‘poet’ and ‘inspiration’. What has been lost and what has been, perhaps, been gained due to historic changes to the archetypes?

How to Analyse a Book that Critiques Rationality and Scientific Thinking

Because of the nature of the material we will cover it is well to state, at this juncture, that a strictly analytical approach to Graves’s work would likely prove detrimental to our intentions. Various anthropologists and mythographers studying primordial and Indigenous (or First nations) cultures emphasise the limited value of applying modern Western modes of thinking and analysis to primordial mythic and religious material.⁴

⁴ See Levy-Bruhl. ‘The Mythic World’ in *Primitive Myth* [Uni. of Queensland press, 1983 N.Y.] pg.32-62;

When Western forms of understanding and analysis are explicitly attacked, as is the case with Graves in *The White Goddess*, the process of dispassionate assessment becomes doubly difficult.

It is Graves's argument that mythic thought is different and primary to analytical thought. We will thus frequently need to stand outside of the modern scholar's rationalistic and scientific modes of reference in order to engage with Graves's alternative arguments properly. Some writers have even suggested that *The White Goddess*, though fronting as a relatively rational nonfiction thesis, is structured in such a way that it resists simple rational summarising, instead promoting, through stylistic obfuscations not evident in any of his other writings, an apparently kaleidoscopic dream vision. One scholar went so far as to suggest that the book is designed to 'create poets' by forcing readers to sideline their ordinary rational faculties and activate instead intuitive, visionary and symbolic modes of text interpretation. The language of Graves's 'Muse-Goddess Religion' is, of course, theorized to be fundamentally symbolic, visionary and mythopoeic in structure, rather than rational, logical and prosaic. If this theory is correct, then the sub-text to Graves's book signifies Mercurial-Hermesian 'mischief making' of the highest order.

According to Graves, it is a sign of social disintegration that poetry is no longer central to our way of experiencing the world. This eclipse of the poetic, and therefore the imaginative, symbolic and the mythopoeic modes of being, has occurred due to the gradual ascent of certain malign cultural and religious forces. The eclipse occurs culturally through various forms of social conditioning carried out by learning institutions, the mass media, social conventions, standards of morality and other aspects of a lifestyle Graves explicitly labels as 'urban' in his text.⁵

The result, according to his thesis, is that by our teenage years the average Westerner is unable to think in sacralised mythopoeic ways. Here, however, Graves doesn't emphasise enough the immensity of this change in the young person's consciousness. Gradualist forms of socially institutionalised trauma—to which the spiritual expansion initiated by the primordial Triple Goddess might be offered as a poetic/ creative/ imaginative remedy—is, I will suggest, at the core of the deadening of the mythopoeic in childhood.

What replaces the mythopoeic or natural way of experiencing the world, according to Graves, is a 'synthetic' rational form of thought.⁶ A sort of disenchanted, largely lifeless, cliché-ridden language, close to propaganda—labelled by Graves 'gleemanship' but best understood in our age as 'entertainment'—is consumed by the rest of the culture.⁷ Sports, television shows, popular songs, magazine and newspaper articles, advertising, Hollywood movies, popular genre novels, etc.; all contain 'mythic' elements; however, they lack the genuinely numinous and transformative elements encountered in Goddess-inspired poetry.

The two forms of thinking combined, if I read Graves correctly, encompass most forms of modern representational discourse. He explicitly says that we no longer think poetically, we no longer express feelings poetically, we no longer view the cosmos poetically and, finally, our longings and 'difficulties in being' are seldom explored in mythopoeic ways. Mastery of these synthetic forms of discourse, Graves tells us,

also Mircea Eliade's work *The Sacred and the Profane*. [London, 1986] and Jung 'The Plight of the Individual in Modern Society' in *The Undiscovered Self* [R.K.P. 1986, London].

⁵R. Graves, *T.W.G.* pg. 11; pg.14; pg.484. demonstrate Graves' dislike for 'confirmed townsmen.'

⁶ Graves (op. cit. pg. 10) traces this type of thinking back to the earliest Greek philosophers of 'reason'.

⁷ Ibid. Chapter One. 'Poets and Gleemen', comments on Medieval entertainments and entertainers that were popular and sometimes seemed poetic, at least in the eyes of the masses, but were not authentically poetic (according to Graves's stipulated definitions). The chief difference was that the Gleeman gave temporary pleasure, whilst the poet was a sacralised being producing poetry, story and/or music capable of transforming a life and grappling with the deepest issues of human existence.

confers social standing, wealth, influence, fame (for some), social status, etc. on our society's most privileged scribes, but, we are informed, this Devil's pact also entails subtle forms of spiritual degradation. In fact, down the ages, according to Graves, those who have turned their back on the Triple Goddess have often paid a price.⁸

The writing of *T.W.G.*, then, can be seen as a poet's personal answer to the devaluation of his calling in the eyes of the greater community—and with Graves we can certainly speak of a poetic calling being the equivalent of a religious calling. The book works to articulate the cultural mutations that have made for poetry's fall from grace as well as the consequences for individuals and society.

Quite clearly the serious modern poet (whether still influenced by Modernist free verse poetics, or by more recent Postmodernist innovations) is very different in operation and cultural reception to the God or Goddess possessed dancing shamans/shamanesses and ecstatic priests/priestesses that typified the 'poetic experience' in ancient, as well as modern, Indigenous cultures. This fact, the anthropological and archeological evidence proves categorically. The point is: what else has been lost because of this radical change in the nature of the 'poetic' and, more importantly, what can be regained if we take Graves's ideas seriously and attempt a resurrection, of some sort, for our own crisis-ridden age? Is the resurrection, in some respects, already underway?

Luckily, I believe the amendments to Graves's primary thesis that I will outline here, are both logical *and* mythically sustainable.

Realigning Graves's Triple Muse-Goddess With Poetry and Healing Goddesses from Numerous Cultures

Above all else, Graves's Muse-Goddess is a highly 'numinous' and transformative archetype, especially in terms of the way in which she interacts with her chosen poets. Many of her ancient British pagan manifestations hint at a complex healing role for poets and poetry, since 'Celtic' Goddesses of Poetry were often, themselves, deities of healing. Brigid, for example, is Goddess of Poets, Alchemists/Smithies and Healers. Rhiannon, although primarily a Goddess of horses (where she has been linked with the Gaulish deity, Epona), is also a Goddess of the arts (due to her 'song birds'). The song birds hint strongly of a healing role for Rhiannon and poets in ancient Welsh pagan culture. The primary ancient British Goddess discussed in *T.W.G.* is Cerridwen (though scholars argue about whether she is, in fact, linked to an ancient Pre-Christian deity). Graves rightly points out her centrality to the Taliesin story. She also seems to have had multiple roles, including those of poetry and healing, that parallel roles assigned to Brigid.

When we look at Seshat, the Egyptian goddess of libraries, science, music, etc.; Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of music and learning; Tara, especially Green Tara, the Buddhist goddess; also, Athena in the ancient Greek tradition; Minerva, in the Roman world, we see that goddesses of music, poetry, education, story-telling, knowledge guardianship, etc. often have co-functions linked to psycho-spiritual and even physical healing. These types of goddesses and ancestor beings are a more or less global

⁸ Graves, *T.W.G.* pg. 12. concerns the supposed sexual degradation, and eventual suicide, experienced by Socrates because of, according to Graves, his turning his back on the Goddess. In our postmodern world, of course, such opinions seem dated, and perhaps even smack of 'homophobia', but they are best understood in the light of feminist arguments detailing the historic power wielded by privileged associations of male priests, scholars, scientists, businessmen, political leaders, etc. that via the exclusion of women and the female perspective developed unbalanced intellectual traditions that contributed to a range of social and cultural problems. Interestingly, US poet, translator, teacher and poetry journal editor, Clayton Eshleman, in Chapter 10 of his nonfiction work (a collection of essays) *Companion Spider* deals with both the strengths and weaknesses (for its time) of *The White Goddess*. He briefly addressed concerns related to Graves' homophobia, as well as possible race implications linked to the Goddess being 'white' (or 'black' in Graves's other work 'the Black Goddess') by way of using another poet's phrase concerning the book 'we might properly call her the Rainbow Goddess'.

phenomenon and it is these figures, I would argue, that most obviously deserve the title 'Muse-Goddesses'.

Graves is right, I will argue, to suggest that a realignment of Westernised cultures with archaic forms of feminine divinity may help cure modern societies of their pathological, exploitative approach to 'nature' and human beings. However, I think the figures we might loosely align with Graves's 'Muse-Goddess' archetype not only initiate an influx of visionary and consciousness expanding energy (understood as a kind of numinous 'ecstasy'), but also, through this excess of numinous emotion, they facilitate catharsis and psycho-spiritual healing. Among the ancient Welsh bards, for example, we can speak of the transference of '*awen*' from poet to audience. Among the ancient Irish *fili* the same process was described via the term *imbas forosnai*. These energetic manifestations of inspiration, were, in turn, linked to the variously termed life force, i.e. in Welsh to concepts like *nerth*, *ynni*, *byw* and *nwyvre* (if we go with Iolo in *The Barddas* and some modern druids). We note also that when Graves describes the psycho-physical effects people experience when they hear true poetry he resorts to highly visceral language—some of which is quoted from other poets. There is, I would suggest, good reason for these effects, but they are not merely indicators of aesthetic engagement, rather, they indicate that the entire nervous system is being activated. More on Graves's understanding of the ecstatic states associated with the Triple Goddess as our text unfolds.

The Species Calamity of the Goddess in Eclipse: Cultural, Sociopolitical and Environmental Implications

Graves believed that, due to religious and philosophical changes, the 'Poet', and the 'Muse-Goddess' have fallen from grace in most Westernised societies. He felt that poetry is no longer seen as linked to sacred magic arising out of, and moving back and forth between, a kind of parallel realm of the Ancestors, Gods, the dead etc.—i.e. places of spiritual immanence (what Indigenous Australians term the 'eternal uncreated', which was given the somewhat misleading title of 'the Dreaming' by white commentators).⁹ In these parallel spiritual realms we are somehow connected to both our own past as well as to the Gods or ancestors that created us and watch over the human realm. But Graves also emphasizes that poetry has lost its previously 'front and center' association with female spiritual forces.

Traditional poetry is also geared to combating mythic forms of evil; that is it combats various physical and emotional illnesses represented as mythic monsters, or what the Greeks called the Keres.¹⁰ Such creatures were said to possess people and could even afflict entire societies, though they were often visualised as something apart from humanity, spiritual 'germs' of some sort. In early religions, the signs of their presence involved distorted emotional and cognitive responses to others and the world at large. Thus a person suffering from what would these days be diagnosed as a 'mental illness' might, from a primordial perspective, be seen as having been taken over by nefarious 'spirits'.¹¹ Where there is significant social or personal stress it is the poet's job to realign

⁹ See T.G.H. Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia*. Part Three, 'Subject Matter and Themes of the [Arandan] songs'. Also Jane Harrison's work *Prolegomena*, [Merlin Press, 1980, Kent], espec. Ch. 2 'The Ritual of Ghosts and Spirits'; Ch. 3. 'The Harvest Festivals'; Ch.4. 'The Women's Festivals'; and Ch. 5. 'The Demonology of Ghosts Sprites and Bogeys.' For the idea of the Eternal Uncreated see Levy-Bruhl, op. cit. pg. 15-17.

¹⁰ Jane Harrison. op. cit. Ch. 5. 'The Demonology of Ghosts Sprites and Bogeys.' See also Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, [Macmillan, 1978, London] especially Part 2, 'Taboo and the Perils of the Soul.' Ch. 2. Pp. 26-100. See also Middleton Ch. 4. 'The Concept of Bewitching.' in her book *Magic, Witchcraft and Curing*, [N.H.P. 1967, New York].

¹¹ Jane Harrison. op. cit. pg.169."Ker as Evil Sprite."

the person afflicted with the tribal deities and, more generally, with forces linked to the transpersonal realms.

Graves attributed many of the social, political and environmental issues afflicting modern humanity to the suppression of female sacred energies from our important collective discourses. Industrial scale warfare, weapons of mass destruction, the Promethean pact between humanity and Classical science (which in his view disenchanting Nature, making it ripe for exploitation and plunder), the gathering environmental crisis, our addictions to (usually) male ‘Father Figure’ dictatorships and populists, and so on, were all natural developments, to Graves, of the eclipse of the Goddess figure and her narratives in our society.

Our study will attempt an update to Graves’s original critiques of—and predictions for—modern society given our dangerously alienated relationship to the life-sustaining earth. However, I will argue that it is not enough to proffer the Goddess as a cure, without working through the metaphysics of her immanence as well as her exact methods for curing individuals and societies of our very modern ‘sicknesses of the soul’.

How Much of Graves’s Religion of the Goddess is his Own Invention?

Unless the metaphysics (and therefore the theology) of Graves’s religion is thoroughly addressed, we might find ourselves signing up to a ‘religion of the Goddess’ that is, in fact, at least in part, Graves’s invention (i.e. not anciently authentic). Graves, however, was up front about his theories and sources, and unlike two of the other major Celtic Mythmakers of recent history—Iolo Morganwg and James Macpherson¹²—never stooped to forging poems and obscuring his sources to round out his theories of an ancient Goddess religion. There is, however, some mischievousness afoot, I think, in Graves’s brilliant (from a poetic perspective) reworking of the standard version of the ‘Battle of the Trees’ (i.e. the *Cad Goddeau*) to bolster his ‘concealed language of the Goddess’ theory.

Readers of *T.W.G.* are probably interested in finding out which aspects of his theory can be backed-up factually, and which parts perhaps arise from the inventiveness of his own mind. Also, the days of Western writers, intellectuals etc. simplifying, cherry-picking, re-contextualising, appropriating selectively and even misrepresenting completely the beliefs of Indigenous peoples to suit their own intellectual purposes has passed. Some of Graves’s primary inspirations, in particular James Frazer, Edward Davies, Johann J. Bachofen and perhaps Margaret Murray, have been critiqued on these grounds. We will thus need to revisit three core aspects of Graves’s ‘historical argument’ regarding the eclipse of the ‘Goddess religion’ to see whether any conclusive evidence has recently been assembled to affirm or rebuff Graves’s theorising (as laid out in *T.W.G.*).

1. What is the current scholarly position on a Neolithic ‘Religion of the Goddess’ supposedly active across large swathes of western, northern and Mediterranean ‘Old Europe’ prior to the advent of patriarchal Polytheism (such as we find outlined in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and patriarchal Monotheist traditions? A sub-question here concerns the exact nature of that Goddess tradition: did it tend toward matriarchal or matrifocal monotheism or were its characteristics more in line with Graves’s theory of a Triple Goddess, or was it more diverse again in terms of its female divinities. Also, are Graves’s arguments about the role of both

¹² The epic poetry supposedly written by the Scottish bard “Ossian” turned out to be, at least in part, James Macpherson’s imaginative fabrication, likewise sections of the *The Bardass*, as well as other works associated with the Welsh poet and antiquarian Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams)’ were straight forgeries.

male divinities (or Ancestor, etc. figures) and male priests/adherents of the religion historically accurate?

2. What is the current scholarly position on Graves's notion that in ancient Britain two traditions (one associated with matriarchy and the Muse-Goddess, the other associated with Polytheistic forms of patriarchy) did battle and that a primordial version of Ogham (the ancient British 'language of the Goddess') fell into disuse after the defeat of the people of the Goddess. Note: this material also involves a contemporary reassessment of Graves's 'Tree Alphabet' assertions, including his claims that aspects of the Taliesin story and the Battle of the Trees poem (i.e. the *Cad Goddeau*) concealed (from adherents of the new patriarchal polytheistic religion sweeping Britain) religious truths related to an ancient Goddess faith. The concealment, according to Graves, involved riddles and a deliberate scrambling process applied to the original text/narrative which was sacred to the Goddess. Graves's historical argument—developed in about a third of the book's chapters—proceeds from a belief that the deliberately 'pied' surviving text of the poem contains mythological and historical hints that can be 'decoded' by anyone with enough mythological knowledge.¹³
3. We also need to reassess an anthropological and mythological argument Graves, like many writers and creative artists of the early twentieth century, took from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, i.e. the idea that in pre-patriarchal religions a 'sacred king' came to power by either slaying the previous 'sacred king' or adopting his place after a sacrifice of the previous ruler had been enacted (possibly on an annual basis to do with the cycle of the seasons). In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer suggested that this essentially political institution—i.e. one involving the regular subjugation of a temporary male ruler to the political will of a matriarchal Sovereignty Goddess of some sort—was, in fact, a global institution linked to matriarchal levels of social and cultural organization everywhere, i.e. it was a fundamental aspect to a pre-historic Religion of the Goddess. Graves modifies Frazer's theory somewhat for poets, partly justifying his move by pointing out that political kingship was merged (in the figure of the Sacred King) with priestly functions at matriarchal levels of social organization. Nevertheless, we are bound to ask, after we've assessed current research findings on both Indigenous and ancient political and poetic institutions and traditions, whether: a) the Sacred King idea applies universally in matriarchal traditions; b) if it does, is Graves's merging of institutions fundamental to matriarchal politics *with* roles associated with poets and poetry in such societies (as well as the psycho-spiritual dramas poets are supposed to endure in the name of the Goddess) historically justifiable as a model for poet to Muse-Goddess relationships? These are fundamental questions impacting on Graves's entire argument since when he talks about the universalism of 'the single poetic theme' Frazer's theorizing becomes foundational. More importantly, the fundamental nature of the Muse-Goddess, i.e. her key personality traits, end up being affected by the essentially political concerns of 'Sovereignty Goddesses' and their need to regularly sacrifice Sacred Kings. In short, is the much commented on 'cruelty in love' outlined in Graves's version of the Muse-Goddess/White Goddess a politics-derived cruelty? Such a conclusion would be premature. There are hints elsewhere in Graves's work that the fundamental 'cruelty' displayed by the Muse-Goddess arises from a poet's unconscious adherence to patriarchal spiritual and social principles. On this reading, the Muse-Goddess would be a kind of

¹³ We note that Graves gives a fair hearing (pg. 108-113 of *T.W.G.*) to Macalister's contrary argument about Ogham's development and concludes his own reasons for disagreeing with Macalister's stance by stating: 'I pass on [Macalister's] caution in all fairness, for my argument depends upon O'Flaherty's alphabet, and Dr. Macalister is a very broad back for anyone to shelter behind who thinks that I am writing nonsense.' (*T.W.G.* p.112).

spiritual teacher, and her rejection, at times, of the male poet would be understood as a rejection of the general patriarchal desire to dominate womankind. However, such a stance by a mortal woman possessed of a Muse-Goddess could hardly be called a gesture of true ‘cruelty’ toward a male poet. If the universality of the Sacred King theory proves incorrect, I would argue that we also need to modify the theorised ‘cruelty’ of the Muse-Goddess figure as presented to us in *T.W.G.*.

We need to assess the current state of scholarship in these three areas, in particular, because definitive answers to these questions may assist us to determine which elements of Graves’s proposed ‘Religion of the Goddess’ are genuinely archaic, and which parts are his inventions—though probably adapted from leading 19th and 20th century scholars.

It is worth mentioning, however, that in the decades following the original publication of the book, Graves’s assertions regarding: 1. the existence of an original Great Goddess religion in Old Europe and beyond; 2. the idea that a Roman era Celtic Tree Alphabet overturned an earlier Celtic Tree Alphabet (derived from Europe-wide sources) that concealed an archaic Goddess alphabet; and 3) the application of the Sacred Kingship theory (derived from Frazer) to relationships between male poets and their Muses, became less central to the overall Goddess religion argument. Many of those influenced by the book understood intuitively that its revolutionary message did not stand or fall on the historical arguments discussed above.

This is because other scholars, activists, poets and writers had been articulating arguments about matriarchal societies and women’s spiritual traditions since at least the 19th century. *The White Goddess* drew attention to something previously ‘hidden in plain sight’, that is the plethora and diversity of goddess traditions evident within Ancient Greek, Roman, Celtic, Norse and Egyptian forms of polytheism. By the 1970s the moment for a resurrection of goddess traditions had arrived, largely under the nurturance of the New Age Movement (especially its Neo-pagan strands) and Second-Wave Feminism. The Goddess Movement, and what later became known as ‘Mythopoetic Feminism’, took off at this time and a range of social, cultural, political, metaphysical, etc. issues were discussed within these new forums. For the first time in centuries, people felt empowered to reacquaint themselves with dozens of pagan goddesses historically evident in foundational Western pagan traditions. In this redraft I’ve thus made use of many studies conducted in the wake of the 20th century shift of focus back to divinized female entities.¹⁴

By the late 20th century the search for goddesses had become global, and studies of key Hindu, Buddhist, North American Indian, Indigenous Australian, Polynesian, etc. female spiritual entities proliferated. Some of those studies have enriched this redraft of

¹⁴ Anne Shearer’s *Athene: Image and Energy*, Karl Kerényi’s *Athene: Virgin and Mother in Greek Religion and Goddesses of Sun and Moon*, d’Este and Rankine’s *Hekate: Liminal Rites*, Helene P. Foley’s *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Philip E. Slater’s *The Glory of Hera*, Brian Wright’s *Brigid: Goddess, Druidess and Saint*, Courtney Weber’s *Brigid: History, Mystery, and Magick of the Celtic Goddesses*, Marina Warner’s *Alone of Her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Violet MacDermot’s *The Fall of Sophia*, R. E. Witt’s *Isis in the Ancient World*, Erich Neumann’s *The Great Mother*, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford’s *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolutions of an Image*, Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade*, Merlin Stone’s *When God was a Woman*, Nor Hall’s *The Moon and the Virgin: Reflections on the Archetypal feminine*, Miranda Green’s *Celtic Goddesses*, Marija Gimbutas’s archaeological Goddess trilogy *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, *The Language of the Goddess* and *The Civilisation of the Goddess*, Leonard Shlain’s *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, E.O. James’s *The Cult of the Mother Goddess*, Michael Jordan’s *Gods of the Earth: The Quest for the Mother Goddess and the Sacred King*; Sjojo and Mor’s *The Great Cosmic Mother*; Barbara Walker’s *Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*; John O’Meara’s *On Nature and the Goddess in Romantic and Post-Romantic Literature and Shakespeare, the Goddess, and Modernity*; and Buffie Johnson’s *Lady of the Beasts: Ancient Images of the Goddess and Her Sacred Animals*.

my original study.¹⁵

Apart from the new research to be assessed dealing with these developments, it is also worth noting that for this draft, I have had the benefit of being able to consult hundreds of high quality historic articles, reviews, letters, essays, study extracts, etc. related to Graves and his contemporaries as assembled published in digital form at a new online site called *The Robert Graves Review*. This site features scholarly material spanning the years 1972 to 2021. Similarly, Gravesian scholarship has been advanced by a number of book-length biographies and essay anthologies published over the last few decades: e.g. Miranda Seymour's biography *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* as well as Firla and Lindop's (eds.) critical essay collection *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's The White Goddess*. These augment Richard Percival Graves's earlier three-part biography of Graves's life.

Finally, for this redraft, I've also been able to access more material written by, or relating to, Lara (Riding) Jackson and her opinions about T.W.G., Graves's proposed 'religion of the Goddess', her work *The Word "Woman"*, and so on. Hopefully these additions will enrich this draft for readers.

Love, Creativity and the Goddess

One lens through which to view *The White Goddess* and 'The Black Goddess' is to see them as two chapters of an epic, multidimensional, but fraught, love poem. The books are love prose-poems to specific women in Graves's life, but also to the 'woman who stops time', i.e. the multi-faceted Triple Goddess/Muse-Goddess who, according to some scholars, Graves eventually saw as standing outside the 'wheel' of time and suffering. But the love theme driving these works needs further elaboration, since the numinous visionary experiences Graves reported during his service as a poet-priest in the 'religion of the Goddess' also involved a love of nature and life itself that became evident in both his poetry and his prose works.

It is worth taking a closer look then, at what the texts, and Graves generally, have to say about the special nature of the love that binds poets to their Muse-Goddesses. We will see that two apparently contradictory traditions are at play – a tradition drawn from Romanticism and Courtly Love ideals and a tradition related to Graves's adoption of James Frazer's 'Sacred Kingship' and matriarchy thesis.

The elements drawn from Western Romantic ideals stretch back, through epic Modernist muse-poet duos (e.g. Yeats and Maud Gonne, Baudelaire and Jean Duval), Medieval Romance representations (e.g. Petrarch and Laura, Dante and Beatrice), through to ancient Roman and Greek representations (i.e. Catallus and 'Lesbia', who was probably Clodia Metelli, and Sappho and her lovers). In the Medieval era, the Courtly Love ethic was a way for poet/troubadours and others circulating in high society, to celebrate the virtues of a perfect and beautiful—but sometimes torn (i.e. between love and duty)—higher status woman that the male poet fell in love with in a platonic way. In this tradition sexuality, supposedly, was not the point, and love of this kind was ideally supposed to raise knights, poets, etc., as well as the beloved, above the level of ordinary men and women.

Elements of this tradition found their way into the Arthurian Cycle and served as a constant sub-story even within Medieval Christian traditions. Graves himself, in *The White Goddess*, narrates in detail several celebrated cases of problematic love suffered by druids and other Celtic poets, priests and nuns.

¹⁵ In this study I've made use of, among others, Ron Jenkins's *Saraswati in Bali: A Temple, a Museum, and a Mask*, Sara E. Truman's *Searching for Guan Yin*, Stephan Beyer's *Magic and Ritual in Tibet: The Cult of the Tara*, Jasnow and Zauzich's *Conversations in the House of Life* (which details, among other things, the role of the Egyptian Goddess Seshat in educating Egyptian scribes); and Wolkstein and Kramer's *Innana: Queen of Heaven and Earth*.

Graves attaches aspects of this long tradition to his narrative concerning the relationship between the Muse-Goddess and her Poets, and through that, his proposed ‘religion of the Goddess’ also ends up featuring elements drawn from this long tradition of unrequited (or in the modern terminology: *limerence*-prone) love.

We have discussed already Frazer’s ideas about the ‘Sacred King’s’ supposed relationship to powerful female deities in pre-patriarchal religious traditions, pointing, in particular, to their essentially political nature. When, however, elements drawn from Frazer’s model enter Graves’s ideas about the intensely psycho-spiritual dramas that unfold between Poet and Muse-Goddess in his proposed ‘Religion of the Goddess’ we note that personality traits linked to cruelty and, what in any other situation we’d call ‘psychopathology’, enter the picture. Graves obviously felt that the major Muse of his life, i.e. Laura (Riding) Jackson displayed some of these traits during their association, so there is a highly personal dimension to Graves’s acceptance of Frazer’s somewhat problematic argument. Our question, however, is obvious: are the personality traits associated with cruelty that Graves assigns to the Muse Goddess to be taken as universal features of the creative relationship or is something else going on here? Would the perceived ‘cruelty’ of the Muse-Goddess—if removed from the Sacred King and Sovereignty Goddess situation/theory—be better understood as some sort of psychological projection on to the beloved, on the part, in particular, of poets raised with patriarchal expectations of love (or just generally with problematic personality traits)? Put more simply—and here we are in the more universal human domain of ‘limerence’ or ‘unrequited love’ experiences—is Graves’s proposed ‘Poet in the service of the Muse-Goddess’ given open slather to project traits we’d ordinarily associate with ‘cruelty’ and ‘psychopathology’ onto any inspirational woman who just so happens to be unresponsive to the poet’s declarations of love?

Since in this sub-discourse of Graves’s work we encounter his views on what we might call a relations-based ‘science of inspiration’ that develops, undoubtedly, long-running traditions dealing with creativity and ‘psychosexual mysticism’, we need to explore more closely the love dimension to Graves’s works. In particular, we will reassess the idea that the Muse-Goddess literally possesses a mortal woman for a time, and then, through her, ‘sings’ poems to the male poet/lover. Graves was outlining, in essence, an archaic understanding of ‘love possession’ (‘psychosexual mysticism’) as a key driver of authentic creativity and therefore of flowerings of authentic poetry. However, how accurately does Graves define those archaic psychosexual elements, and is the theorizing of James Frazer a solid enough base upon which to universalize, in the personality of the ‘Muse-Goddess’, traits of ‘cruelty’ and psychopathology linked, by Frazer, to epiphanies he had regarding the annual sacrifice of a Sacred King (as *Rex Nemorensis*) on the shores of Lake Nemi in Italy in the name of Diana Nemorensis?

Conclusion: A Text to Initiate Poets that Fronts as a Nonfiction Book on Poetic Inspiration

My own concerns in this exploration are practical as well as scholastic, since as a music composer, writer, teacher of creatives and poet many of the issues we’ll discuss concern me directly. I first came across *The White Goddess* in the early 1980s and the work became central to my own ‘becoming’ as a poet, writer, songwriter and so on. The first draft of this study was written within the walls of academia, and thus I felt the need to proceed in an exclusively objective and rational direction with regard to my analysis. In revising and updating my original text I feel less inclined to proceed exclusively from this stance.

In truth, the book transferred to me a sense of the numinous, expansive and soul making possibilities implicit to poetry, as well as creative writing generally. In a very real sense, it was one of the books that made me into a word artist. I’m thus very fond of

the book, and fascinated by the way it's kaleidoscopic, enigmatic, chaotic, and yes, frustrating aspects nevertheless worked to transmit its numinous, visionary core to myself, and obviously many other readers, without offering us an easy summary of its more rational, scholarly thesis. I read it as a work of 'poetics'—a kind of manifesto really—but in revising my original paper of the early 1990s, I realized that I've also always read it as an enigmatic semi-spiritual document. The fact that it presented as a book about the authentic sources of creativity and inspiration helped conceal its spiritual subtext. In doing the extra research required to write this up-date, however, I've been forced to take Graves at his word. When he talked about the 'religion of the Muse-Goddess' he meant exactly what he said, i.e. authentic poetry is the sacred script of a 'religion of the Goddess'. How I currently feel about this dimension to the work will be revealed as the text proceeds.

To summarise this introduction to Graves's work, I'd like to argue that deep engagement with his Muse-Goddess thesis, across all his work, offers us a kind of loose blueprint for reviving our personal sense of the 'numinous'—a prime ingredient in any recipe for living in an animated lit-up world for much of our lives. To me the work has helped inoculate me from our modern epidemics of 'disenchantment', 'chronic ennui', 'meaninglessness', 'anomie', alienation', 'desacralisation' etc., Industrial, Space and Information Age diseases that have haunted the interior worlds of so many. I have investigated and written about these 'maladies of the (modern and postmodern) subject' extensively elsewhere (i.e. in my book detailing the history of the phenomenon of chronic forms of ennui), so I will not be going into excessive detail here, but it is worth mentioning that Graves himself seemed to use his 'religion of the Muse-Goddess' to ward off the worst effects of all manner of difficult life events, notably: 1) the lifelong traumas linked to the processes of public school bastardisation he'd endured in his youth; 2) hellish memories of the automated, Industrial Age slaughter he'd witnessed on the battlefields of WW1 and which left him with war injuries, both physical and psychological (i.e. 'shell-shock' and post-traumatic stress disorder); 3) numerous setbacks in his love life – particularly the loss of Laura Riding to American poet and philosopher, Schuyler Jackson, in the late 1930s, and, finally, 4) a desire to overcome certain congenital personality flaws and neuroses that plagued him throughout his life.

Regardless of my feelings about the intuitive 'numinous metaphysics' I associate with *The White Goddess* I cherish the book for another reason. Graves's belief in the importance of the mythopoetic world-view to artists, seems to me to expand our creative possibilities well beyond the isolated acts and achievements associated with being merely individualist—personal achievement obsessed—poets and artists. The book demands of poets a degree of transcendence of merely personal concerns, anxieties, goals and motivations to do with writing poetry, songs, fiction and nonfiction. The book demands that we quieten the personal creative ego for a time and expand our creative horizons beyond the merely personal.

Finally, in terms of the many current crises facing the human species, it seems to me that it has much of worth to say about what we might call the psycho-spiritual history of our species—whether we call it a progression, an evolution, a devolution of some sort, or something altogether different. To pre-empt my own final position, slightly, I believe that the essential core to the 'Poet' archetype is a universal association between this figure and manifestations of what I call 'fundamental creativity' that link story-telling, poetry, etc. to social and cultural processes of creative (perhaps evolutionary) adaptation that respond to unfavourable environmental conditions by positing 'alternative'—i.e. 'better'—futures' etc. for both individuals and groups/societies. This core role of poets, remains even when the 'motifs', 'social roles', etc. associated with the 'poet' figure vary between cultures and across historical epochs. By the time we conclude this study of Graves's work, we will, I hope, have arrived in logical fashion, at the very gates of a Quantum or New Science understanding of 'poetry', 'poet', 'poetics', 'Muse-Goddess',

‘inspiration’ and ‘creativity’. Our explorations here will act as a precursor to an encounter with the Quantum Muse.