

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

Copyright, Dr. Ian Irvine, 2022 (and 1993), all rights reserved.

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 Two: The Influence of An *Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*



All images used to accompany this text are either my own or are in the Public Domain. All quotes and extracts from texts, etc. consulted for inclusion in the work are made use of for the purposes of literary criticism and academic assessment of ideas and theories (as authorised by international copyright law). However, I want to encourage readers to purchase and read in full the many texts mentioned in this work.

Published by the Zoetics Institute, Bendigo, Australia.

The White Goddess was written just after the Second World War and thus sits squarely in the middle of the twentieth century. On the personal level, Graves's relationship with Laura Riding had disintegrated by the start of WW2, and though he'd begun a new relationship he was nevertheless struggling to deal with Riding's absence from his life. Similarly, due to the Spanish Civil War, he and Riding had been forced to flee their beloved home in Majorca and it was not until the end of WW2 that he was able to return. We also note that he'd been a Captain in the British army during WW1, where he'd sustained a severe wound to one of his lungs due to shell fragment penetration. The wound was so bad that Graves was actually pronounced dead. Although he eventually survived the injury, he suffered from shell shock for several years after being discharged (today we'd call it Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). He was eventually treated for the condition by an innovative psychiatrist, and though things improved the horrors he'd witnessed on the battlefield never entirely left him.

Graves wrote *The White Goddess* in the shadows of three new 'social' horrors: the nuclear bombing of Japanese cities (and thus the advent of the Nuclear Age); the discovery of the Nazi gas chambers; and the terrible carnage of the Second World War itself. Although many artists and intellectuals understood that Western civilization was in a bad way, few knew how to define or fix its many pressing ailments. The immediate post-war mood in Britain and Europe was somber, if not bleak, as nations set about rebuilding what had been destroyed. Millions had been murdered and millions more had been severely wounded or otherwise damaged. Graves's remarkable book was published during this brief post-WW2 'cultural interstitium'.

We now know that the counterculture, as well as other social, cultural and creative revolutions were on the horizon—that is the Beats, the Hipsters, the Flower Children (or Hippies), Second Wave Feminism, cultural Postmodernism, Anti and Post-colonial movements, the US Civil Rights Movement, Gay Rights activism, disenchantment with Russian-style Communism, as well as, of course, the beginnings of the environmental movement—but in the immediate aftermath of WW2 most writers, artists and intellectuals were either grieving for what had been lost, or taking comfort in the small domestic pleasures afforded them by a return to semi-normality. Graves, on the other hand, was busy composing an epic rewrite of humanity's entire religious history.

We can understand the book as a poet's response to a world gone politically, socially and perhaps spiritually insane. As we have seen in Chapter 1, Graves's formulation of the causes and cures for this insanity, stemmed from his personal belief in certain pre-monotheistic religious principles. Graves linked these principles to cultures that displayed inherent sympathy for poetic ways of thinking about, and experiencing, the world. He believed primordial cultures honoured and respected the role of the poetic imagination in maintaining personal, relational and socio-cultural well-being/health. He argues throughout the book that the cultural extinction of authentic poetry, poets and poetic ways of seeing the world, as well as the extinction of the divinities that nurture poetry and poets, is synonymous with the brutalization and dehumanisation of society. He also argues, that if anti-poetic trends are not reversed our societal excesses will lead us, inevitably, to an early extinction.¹ What is required, he tells us, is a revival and rebalancing of sacred male and female energies, in particular, he calls for a return to the cultural mainstream of ancient conceptions of female divinity—a return, in short, to some sort of 'Religion of the Goddess':

...the longer her hour is postponed, and therefore the more exhausted by man's irreligious improvidence the natural resources of the soil and the sea become, the less merciful will her five-fold mask be.²

¹ Graves, op. cit. pg.14 and pg. 486. Also Chapter 25, 'War in Heaven.' W.G.

² Graves, op. cit. pg. 486. W.G.

The book eventually influenced a number of the social and spiritual movements of the latter part of the 20th century: the ecology movement, the Hippies, certain strands of the Feminist movement (particularly Mythopoeic Feminists and Feminists interested in pagan spiritual systems) and also various strands of the New Age movement. The book's respect for Indigenous forms of knowledge and ways of living close to the earth, as well as Graves's respect for the ancient poetic and artistic traditions of such cultures contributed, surely, to a growing post-WW2 awareness of the 'shadow side' to modernity, especially in terms of Eurocentric forms of colonial oppression. Similarly, Graves's prediction that our warped modern belief systems, though promising the world, will only make matters worse for both our species and the many species we share the planet with, represented an important critique of the consumeristic and scientific utopias then being sold to the masses as the 1950s approached and the Cold War intensified.

At the centre of Graves's despairing vision of modern society is the specter of psycho-spiritual disintegration acted out *en masse*, in terms of industrial-scale warfare, fascism (and other brutalizing ideologies), pollution, authoritarianism and mass alienation/neurosis. At critical ontological junctures he all but aligns himself with the likes of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and others who linked key socio-cultural issues and phenomena to mass psychological and/or psycho-spiritual problems.³

The work was, from the very beginning, controversial. Its attack on both Christianity and scientific materialism was lambasted as anti-scholarly, factually misleading, anthropologically unsound and perhaps most damning of all, nonsensical.⁴ Cambridge University archeologist Glyn Daniels, stated that he'd never encountered so much nonsense placed between the cover of a book. The methodological differences between mythographers, archeologists and poets/artists—perhaps insurmountable in the end, are at issue here. These kind of critiques did not perturb Graves who had prepared for them in the body of his work. Of the scholars who had refused to help him refine his argument he said 'I am disappointed though not entirely surprised.' He then proceeded to attack the social institution of the University, portraying it as a kind of scholastic priesthood sworn to uphold the profane world view of modern Western society.

In a lecture delivered in New York in 1957, Graves described the process by which he came to write *The White Goddess*. He talked of its inception as a sudden 'overwhelming obsession'. The first edition—seventy thousand words in length—was written in just three weeks. Likewise, in his 1960 postscript to the work, he described the magico-religious inspirational nature of the experience, and even allied it to certain intuitive jumps in learning experienced by scientists and inventors.⁵

Graves's candid description of the creative processes that led to the birth and development of the book were always going to prove problematic to mainstream scholars. What is most daunting about the work is, of course, its attempt to draw together into one holistic vision almost all of humanity's psycho-spiritual history. To mid-century scholars reared on academic specialisation—Graves's 'patrons of the institutions they serve'—his attempt at a religious 'TOE' (i.e. religious 'theory of everything') bred automatic suspicion (some of it, perhaps, warranted).

For those operating in the disciplines of anthropology, mythography and literary studies, Graves's self-declared use of a patently unscientific methodology presented them with a scholastic minefield. Nevertheless, many learned individuals, read, admired and appreciated the work. However, because mainstream scholars either did not understand,

³ See Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* [Pelican, 1970, Middlesex] c.f. C.G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* [op. cit.] and Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, [Sphere 1970, London].

⁴ See Richard Graves, *The Assault Heroic*, for a run-down of criticisms of *The White Goddess* [Viking, 1991, London].

⁵ Ibid. pg. 488-92.

or would not accept Graves's multi-faceted narrative of social and cultural decline, those who did engage with it tended to limit their analysis to its use value in understanding other aspects of his work, i.e. his poetry, fiction and other nonfiction works.⁶ In short, most tenured scholars were loath to treat it as anything but a personal statement of poetics.

The more fearless scholars who engaged with the argument—often operating outside of academia—read, critiqued then accepted or rejected Graves's key arguments. In particular, Graves's argument about the concealment of a religious secret in the various poems attributed to the 13th Century 'Taliesin' was seen as unproven and problematic. The contentious issue of matrilineal religious primacy during the Neolithic period, remains in play, and will likely be fought over for decades to come.⁷

The work has had its greatest influence, not surprisingly, among poets, painters, musicians, writers and other artists dedicated to practical explorations of the inspirational process. They seem to have grasped the spirit of the work and have not concerned themselves overly with its scholastic standing. Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and Bob Dylan, for example, all used aspects of the work in their poetry. The work was widely read by leaders of various radical movements and was popular among Bohemians and counterculture groups from the early sixties onwards and remains popular with such groups today (though aspects of its mid-20th century 'gender essentialism' make it seem more dated every year). Barbara Walker's monumental and highly acclaimed work *A Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* gives a back cover tribute to Robert Graves and proceeds to draw heavily on his research throughout the text—there are over three hundred references to his research, of which around one hundred and forty are related to *The White Goddess*. Her book won the 1986 *New York Times* book of the year and highlights Graves's modern influence on such scholars.⁸

Why is his work so useful to such people? Because for progressives of all descriptions the work offers a unique re-appraisal of Western history, especially our political, social, sexual, moral, psychological, religious and philosophical inheritances. More importantly, it achieves this re-appraisal from below—that is from a position of professed historical and ontological primacy. For some Feminists the work thus legitimises ancient forms of pre-patriarchal female freedom. Hence the titles of various later works such as *When God was a Woman* and *In All Her Names*.⁹ By Graves's argument, it is not natural that man should dominate woman, or that God must always be envisaged as a masculine spiritual principle.

Religious and secular forms of patrilineal culture, Graves informs us, do not represent original forms of human culture—instead they represent a kind of militaristic bastardisation of earlier Goddess cultures. More importantly, for some Feminist theorists, the Triple Goddess became an alternative 'spirituality of immanence' perfectly suited to the challenges of our time.

As an example of how Graves's mid-20th century ideas were developed (sometimes critiqued and reworked) in Feminist circles, let us quote Monica Sjoo in *The Great Cosmic Mother*:

⁶ See for example Cohn's 'The White Goddess' in *Robert Graves*, as well as Michael Hamburger in *The Truth of Poetry* pp. 90-92 [Penguin, 1972, London].

⁷ Elizabeth Walker's, *Womans Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* [Harper Publishing N.Y., 1983.]; Marija Gimbutas's *Civilisation of the Goddess* [Harper, San. Fran, 1991.]; and Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's *The Myth of the Goddess* [Penguin, 1993, London], contributed to the debate. Gimbutas's work is particularly well researched and involves decades of archeological work across the length and breadth of the European continent.

⁸ Elizabeth Walker, op.cit.

⁹ Ed. Joseph Campbell and Charles Muses *In All Her Names* [Harper. San. Fran.] - Riane Eisler's essay is particularly useful. Also, M. Stone, *When God was a Woman*, [H.B.J. Books, London.1976].

Academic contempt for myth and magical poetry is analagous to the attitudes of psychoanalysis and Christian theologians toward, what they call 'primitive' or 'pagan' thought processes.¹⁰

Similarly:

When Graves shows, in his exploration of early Greek and early European goddesses, that the loss of female mythic history is the loss of female sociopolitical history, he speaks to all women.¹¹

Others were inspired by the work to rewrite and re-explore more thoroughly Europe's prehistory. Marija Gimbutas, Riana Eisler, Anne Baring, Diana Wolkstein, Mariner Warner and others show engagement with Graves's ideas in their works.

Historians of religion and theorists on human psychological evolution also wrote works influenced by Graves's book, for example, Joseph Campbell, Charles Muses, Samuel Kramer, E.O. James, Eric Neumann, Geoffrey Grigson and many others.¹² The different groups seem to understand that despite some scholastic lapses and the difficult to follow nature of Graves's argument, the work nevertheless articulates a useful alternative vision for modern civilisation.

Another area of influence has been its role in reviving and internationalising literary interest in Celtic and early European oral traditions. In helping to restore the dignity of such sacralised literary traditions it has helped launch and sustain a similar revival and interest world-wide. The current Western fascination with Indigenous creativity and knowledge systems is surely influenced by Graves's argument that such traditions offer forms of social and spiritual harmony suppressed in Western civilization for millennia. Graves did not power such cultural changes alone, however—Jane Harrison, Mircea Eliade, James Frazer, Strehlow and many other scholars, contributed much to our revived interest in Indigenous traditions.¹³ Graves's creative collaborator for many years and lover, Laura Riding, also had a significant input, both in terms of her own nonfiction work (especially *The Word Woman*) and through her direct influence on Graves's Goddess theories.

The work had minimal influence on university literature departments, particularly after the early 1970s. Structuralism, Semiotics, Deconstructionism¹⁴ and other philosophic and, often, overly-abstract, discourses dominated University literature departments from the 1970s on. To Graves, of course, such discourses are fundamentally 'anti-poetic'.

Graves has often been labelled a Romantic Symbolist by literary academics, and *The White Goddess* is often compared to Yeats's *A Vision*, Blake's prophetic books, D. H. Lawrence's *Phantasia of the Unconscious*, Shelley's essay 'In Defence of Poetry' and Coleridge's writings—contained in the *Biographia Literaria*—concerning the nature of the imagination and the primary importance of the poetic faculty in maintaining cultural health.¹⁵ Some of these comparisons underestimate the revolutionary religious re-

¹⁰ Sjoon and Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother* pg. 40-41, [Harper, 1985, N.Y.]

¹¹ Ibid.pg.31.

¹² Eric Neumann's work *The Great Mother* [Bollingen, 1972, N.Y.] is particularly useful, likewise, Charles Muses's article 'The Ageless Way of the Goddess' (in *In All Her Names*, op. cit.). Joseph Campbell's *Primitive Mythology* [op. cit.] is also useful; c.f. Geoffrey Grigson, *The Goddess of Love* [Constable, London, 1976].

¹³ Eliade, *Shamanism*; T.G.H. Strehlow op. cit. and James Frazer, op. cit.

¹⁴ I would argue, that though Derrida's deconstructive theories presumed to critique the entire Western tradition of rational discourse, in practice his work, and the work of the many literary critics he influenced, presented in terms of highly abstract and rational forms of literary criticism i.e. the *modus operandi* was essentially philosophic, rather than poetic, even when deconstructing philosophic texts.

¹⁵ Shelley, 'In Defence of Poetry.' in *Shelley Selected Poems and Prose* ed. G.M. Matthews; [O.U.P. Oxford, 1964]. Coleridge, S. T.; *Biographia Literaria*, [Oxford, O.U.P. 1907]. Yeats, *A Vision*. For

appraisal underway in Graves's work, which helped render it as a mild curiosity for many academics who often give Graves and his book the same kind of treatment reserved for Blake's attempts to formulate a personal mythology i.e. that Graves was all but certifiably mad whilst writing *W.G.* and probably did not understand all the time what he was talking about.¹⁶

Let us turn next to the outline of the sacred poet and poetry we find in Graves's book and essay, *The White Goddess* and 'The Black Goddess'.

passages of Blake's prophetic works see *Major British Poets* pp.40-52. Ed. O. Williams, [Mentor, New York 1963].

¹⁶ For a well-articulated example of how to read a poet's 'philosophic' and prosaic writings the reader is directed to Alee King's essay 'Poetry and Philosophy: In Defence of Yeats's *A Vision*' (in *The Unprosaic Imagination* pp: 157-168). King's portrayal of the conflict between the rationalistic and the poetic mind is sensitive. [Uni. of Western Australia Press, 1975, Perth.]