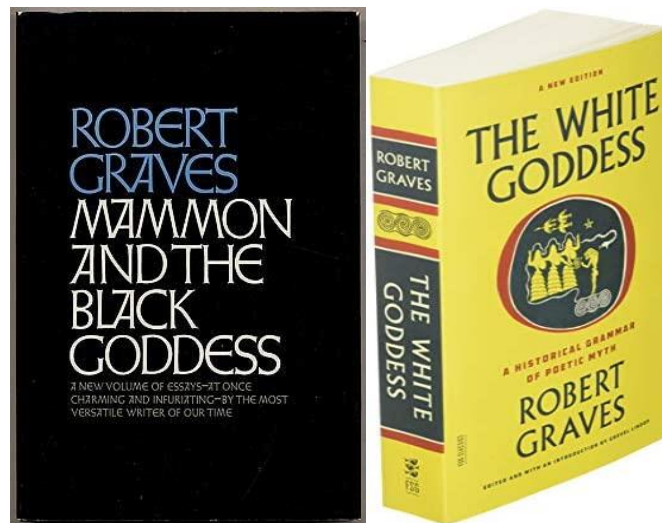


In Search of the Muse-Goddess: Creativity and Female Deities in the Work of Robert Graves

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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 2023 and will run to approximately 60,000 words (an increase on the work's original word count).

Chapter Five - From Georgian Modernism to a Global 'Origins' Poetics: Before and After the 'Abdication'



All images used to accompany this text are early book covers for editions of *Mammon and the Black Goddess* and *The White Goddess*. All quotes and extracts from texts, etc. consulted for inclusion in this chapter 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.

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Neo-Romantic Beginnings: Graves and the Historical Conflict Between Poets and Philosophers

Poets ... are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers ... Poets were in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets ... philosophers of the loftiest power.¹

It is well known that Graves shared many of the insights and critiques of modern society outlined by the Romantic poets and thinkers and that he perceived that literary era as an authentic backlash against the introduction into poetry of 'unpoetic themes' by Neo-Classical, Enlightenment and, later, Realist and some Modernist poets. In *T.W.G.* Graves declared that he'd converted to poetry and the literary life before leaving school, specifically by the age of 15.

Apart from the range of traditional ballad, 'Celtic Revival' and late 18th and 19th century Romantic poetic texts (e.g. Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth, in particular) that he'd been exposed to by his father and grandfather, we might draw attention to the early influence of Skelton on Graves, as well as that of various playwrights, critics and fiction writers, e.g. Samuel Butler (especially the science fiction novel *Erewhon*), H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. Graves' classical education also cut deep and he early on grew attached to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, as well as various works by Ovid, Virgil, Homer and others. His Classical education, however, was soon augmented by readings of works by key 19th century and early 20th century anthropologists and culture theorists. These works were themselves processing the great archaeological and anthropological discoveries of the era. Bachofen's seminal work, *Mother Right* (1861), theorising forms of ancient matriarchy; Jane Harrison's ground-breaking studies into the origins of ancient Greek religion, i.e. *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912)—which also implied matriarchal origins for the Olympians—as well as Margaret Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) became major influences on both his poetry and, eventually, on the arguments outlined in *T.W.G.*. These texts, of course, had been unavailable to Romantic era poets, fiction writers and thinkers and thus we have here some of the most important sources for his attempts to renovate and move beyond the poetics of Romanticism—a project that culminated in *T.W.G.*.

These works also vastly expanded Graves' understandings of the temporal dimensions to religious and cultural history and assisted him to move beyond patriarchal Abrahamic forms of spirituality by gifted him complex and subtle critiques of the monotheism he'd been socialised into. They contributed much to his development of a complex and many-layered timeline for the major paradigm shifts of human cultural history since the late Palaeolithic, since they moved him beyond the notions of history he'd been raised on at school—i.e. as essentially the history of major events, wars, dynasties/Empires, etc., significant people and scientific innovations—toward an understanding of the past as the history of a limited number of clashing religious/spiritual paradigms. This complex, many-layered paradigm-based notion of history is foundational to the argument of *T.W.G.*.

Interestingly, Graves also seems to have read Nietzsche's writings in some depth during WW1, and thereafter was strongly influenced by the philosopher's identification of ancient cultural dualities, stretching back several millennia, between the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses of the psyche and general culture. This idea proved inspirational to Graves and elements of it surely resurfaced in *T.W.G.*. The philosopher perhaps also helped instil in Graves radical notions of creative individualism that helped Graves to

¹ Shelley, op. cit. pp. 169-170 [lines 154-164].

challenge the notions of duty and conformity that English society encouraged at that time. He'd also read Freud prior to meeting Riding, and though he'd undergone treatment for shell-shock at the hands of the anthropologist/psychologist Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, who used, in adapted form, some of Freud's earlier methods based upon catharsis. Graves, however, decided not to undergo deeper forms of psychoanalytic therapy for fear of losing vital unconscious sources for poetic inspiration. Before he'd turned twenty-one he'd also met Edward Marsh (head of the Georgian group of poets), as well as various significant 'war poets' (Sassoon, of course, but also Rupert Brooke and others).

It is worth summarising some of the Romantic and Neoromantic perspectives that Graves had acquired by the end of the first stage of his poetic career (i.e. prior to his teaming up with Laura Riding). He early on adopted elements of 19th century Romantic cultural critiques elevating emotion, intuition, the imagination, magical thinking, and individualistic forms of spirituality *above* the rational, logical and morally conformist (i.e. duty-bound) aspects of the psyche. Here Graves accepted Romantic manoeuvres that saw poetic ways of being in the world (i.e. that privileged the above qualities plus the Dionysian elements of the psyche) as pathways to being fully human, whereas rational and scientific (Apollonian) ways of being in the world were deemed exploitative, disenchanted/alienated and 'anti-poetic' if they were permitted to dominate in the psyche or in general culture. The developments that had brought unpoetic (Apollonian) perspectives to a position of social and cultural dominance had been, according to Graves, centuries, if not millennia, in the making.

Like Blake, who wrote of 'serpentine reason' and labelled the Enlightenment philosophers as mockers of the divine source of all human endeavours, and like Shelley, who wrote of the anarchic and despotic effects that 'ever flow from the unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty,' Graves, early on, joined up with an amorphous group of poets that we might see as Modernist adaptors of nineteenth century poetic Romanticism—indeed, this is perhaps the unspoken poetic of the so-called Georgian poets.²

Graves's attack—outlined in *T.W.G.*—on Plato's *Republic*, for example, on the grounds that it was anti-poetic, and that it represented the beginning of the end for poets as religious figures (i.e. that it attempted to remove poetry from the spiritual center of Western Culture) is a good example of the way in which Graves could bring his paradigm-based understanding of human history to bear with great precision on the writings of this or that iconic cultural figure.³

Excess rationality, according to even the early career Graves, symbolises a mind incapable of empathy for the mythopoetic mindset; it involves a kind of insentience, or limiting of consciousness, that divorces the person from the sacred as something immanent and embedded in life. It also separates us from the imagination and from our sense of nature as animate. Logic is not so much a legitimate alternative vision of life, to Graves, as a means of limiting and denying a vaster more expansive and life-affirmative consciousness. By the 1940s Graves was able to weld these early career insights—derived from 19th century Romantic poetics—to the trans-historical poetics that became the poetics of *T.W.G.*.

Even during his early years as a published poet, Graves' classical education had brought him into contact with a range of ancient texts that made him ponder questions concerning authentic and inauthentic social roles for poets. It is difficult to track exactly when he turned against Plato's pronouncements on the proper role for poets, but I suspect it was quite early in his career—perhaps after reading Nietzsche in the WWI trenches.

² Shelley, op. cit. pg. 177, lines 321-24.

³ Plato, *the Republic*, Book 10, [605] in *Classical Literary Criticism* pg. 48. [op. cit.] We note that Plato wished to outlaw poets, drama-conjured emotion and even the free imagination from his utopian Republic. His personal experiences of poetry and drama, however, seemed to involve both a love *of*, and uneasiness *with*, poetic works: 'even the best of us ... delight in surrendering ourselves.'

After the readings listed above and certainly by the early 1920s, it was, for Graves, simply a matter of 'joining the historical dots' so to speak, by sorting out poets and writers on poetry who supported Plato's dictates (which were really Apollo's dictates) about poetry and the role of poets, in opposition to those who held to less conformist (i.e. more Dionysian) perspectives on authentic poetry and the true role of poets in society.

Perhaps Graves was aware early on that poets who followed Plato's rules for poetry tend to turn out as Horace advised in *On the Art of Poetry*. Horace, like Plato, was keen to control the capacity of poetry to elicit cathartic emotions, labelling them as, in many ways, nefarious. Here is his description of a good poet:

He is a man who has learnt his duty towards his country and his friends, the kind of love he should feel for a parent, a brother and a guest, the obligations of a senator and of a judge, and the qualities required in a general sent out to lead his armies in the field.⁴

Most of these qualities, by the early 1920s, Graves believed could act to stifle the poetic instinct in a civilisation where 'right behaviour' becomes a smoke-screen for social conformity at all costs. An alternative Roman tradition is outlined in Tacitus' *A Dialogue on Orators*. In that text, poets belong to the 'woodland groves' and are noted for their poverty, abstinence from '*luxuria*' and tendency to withdraw from society into the natural world. Here is an extract of Maternus' defence of poets versus rhetoricians:

As for the woodland groves, and the solitary life Aper was jeering at, they bring me such joy that I count it among the principal rewards of poetry that it is composed away from the bustle and the litigant at the door and the shabby and weeping defendants; the mind is free to withdraw to fresh innocent places and enjoy a holy world. This is where true eloquence had its beginnings and its shrine - this is the guise in which it first won over mortals and flowed into hearts still chaste and uncorrupted. This was the language of oracles. The profiteering and bloodstained eloquence of today is a new thing, born of evil habits—as Aper said—a substitute for swords. But the old happy and golden era had neither orators nor accusations, but it swarmed with inspired poets to sing of good deeds and not to defend bad ones.⁵

A number of the elements in this quote align with both Graves's innate Romanticism—indeed its sentiments indicate ancient Roman precursors to 19th Century Romanticism—and his post-WWI descriptions of 'authentic' poetry and poets. It is far from Horace's more Apollonian definition. However, even Horace acknowledged contradictory understandings of the roles of poets when he states:

Poets depend entirely on their inborn gifts and are stimulated by some internal force, a sort of divine spark ... Our great Ennius was therefore right to call poets holy.⁶

That this holiness derives from nature's 'woodland groves' and that a true poet's distrust of civilisation seems acceptable, if puzzling, to ancient writers like Horace and Tacitus. Graves certainly understood, even quite early in his career, that the ancients viewed the

⁴ Horace, 'On The Art of Poetry' (written around 16BCE), in *Classical Literary Criticism* [O.U.P. 1989, Oxford.] pg. 90.

⁵ Tacitus, 'A Dialogue on Orators' (written around 74CE), in *Classical Literary Criticism*, [op. cit.] pp.118-119.

⁶ Ibid. Horace, *The Art of Poetry*.

work of poets with a kind of mystical awe.⁷

Shelley described the ambivalence many felt toward the magical abilities of poets succinctly; 'But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve the power which is seated in their own soul.'⁸ Although Shelley's defence of tragic poets was low key and Aristotelian in tone, he spoke of tragedy as a source of melancholy and pain, 'inseparable from the sweetest melody'.

Poetry to even the early career Graves is primarily a symbolic, imaginative and mythological form of language. This orientation to the world is inborn, as with Shelley's statement that 'poetry is the language of the imagination.'⁹ It is also clear that by the mid-1920s, Graves had come to view the poetic instinct as active among many traditional and indigenous peoples around the world, at least to the degree to which they could maintain their primordial traditions.

In extending upon the perspectives of the Romantics, he also believed that many authors of inauthentic poetry are culturally exalted over the work of true poets. Adopting the role of the 'authentic poet', Graves believed by the 1920s, could lead to a life of economic hardship and, even, peculiar forms of social ostracism.

His final, most significant statement of poetics, i.e. *T.W.G.*, up-dated well-known Romantic insights whilst launching a complex attack on the entire Western literary, philosophical, cultural and religious tradition wherever that tradition privileged materialistic, overly-rational, antipoetic, conformist, or patriarchal religious values.

By the early 1920s, the Romantic and Neo-Romantic perspectives of a range of 19th century poets and thinkers, including perhaps the perspectives of his father and the Georgian poets he'd been associated with, were no longer expansive enough for Graves the poet, nor were they able to assist him to process the profoundly disturbing experiences he'd been subjected to during World War I. Similarly, in the new post-war literary and cultural environment forms of literary Modernism were taking off, and for a few years Graves felt uninspired and emotionally rudderless as he battled 'shell-shock' and processed the consequences of a hasty marriage to Nancy Nicholson, a woman he perhaps was not deeply enough in love with, but whose unconventional ways and considered feminist perspectives quite likely influenced both Graves' poetry and developing poetics.

In essence, the world moved on and the poets and writers of various Modernist movements came to hog the critical limelight. Graves needed to move on too, but it was not until Laura Riding came on the scene that he managed to find a way through the personal and creative impasses he'd been experiencing. For over a dozen years (i.e. from the 1926 until the late 1930s), Riding's unique take on Modernist poetics proved inspirational to Graves, and despite the relational turmoil the couple experienced, Graves' poetic and fictional work benefited greatly from her more realist and, I would argue, vaguely existentialist, certainly less Romantic and Neo-Romantic, poetics and personal life philosophies. Her natural attraction to rational (dare we say Apollonian?) modes of thinking and assessing the world influenced Graves—or at the very least made him more aware of his own critical and argumentation short-comings. In a letter to Sassoon, penned some time in 1927, Graves wrote, somewhat tellingly, that 'Laura is sweet to me and is gradually teaching me how to ratiocinate clearly.'¹⁰

By the time of the publication of Graves' and Riding's combined 1927 book, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, we know with certainty that Graves, along with Riding, had

⁷ Graves, op. cit. *W.G.* pg. 17. 'the feeling is that poetry, since it defies scientific analysis, must be rooted in some sort of magic ... that the nature of poetry is too mysterious to bear examination: is, indeed, a greater mystery than royalty.'

⁸ Shelley, op. cit. pg. 185 [lines 572-575].

⁹ Ibid, pp. 169-71.

¹⁰ As quoted by Richard Perceval Graves in *Robert Graves: The Years With Laura 1926-40*, p. 41, Papermac, 1991.

read critically a range of important Modernist poets—though sometimes it is difficult to ascertain with certainty which of them was most engaged with (and influenced by) the poetics of any given poet under assessment.¹¹ Either way, we know that both Graves and Riding had been reading as critics work by H.D., Robert Frost, W. C. Williams, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Yeats, e.e. cummings, Edith Sitwell, and many others, and that the poetics implicit to their assessments of these poets held to, by and large, decidedly Modernist principles—Graves even acknowledged ‘the death’ (i.e. the out-datedness) of the Georgian movement that had given him such succour in the early part of his career. How much, however, of the book’s overall positive assessment of the Modernist poetic enterprise was deeply felt by Graves—in comparison to Riding—is a matter for debate among literary scholars. When Richard Perceval Graves states that: ‘the book is more than an explanation or defence of Laura Riding’s own poetic practice’¹² we suspect perhaps that Riding’s poetic commitment to the project was fundamental and that many of the questions being asked about the works of Modernist poets (and their poetics) were more urgently experienced by Riding than by Graves, who was completing a book called *The English Ballad* around the same time.

For the purposes of our task in this study, i.e. of better understanding the poetics of *T.W.G.*, we might suggest that Graves’ apparent adoption (during their relationship) of elements of Riding’s Modernist-leaning poetics cut only deep enough, in the end, to assist him to process his Neo-Romantic inheritance along with questions arising from his wide-spread early career readings in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, etc.. After Riding’s influence diminished at the end of the 1930s, he returned with a passion to scholastic and poetic questions that had haunted him since the end of WW1.

By the mid-1940s, the result of all these sometimes contradictory influences was a truly international, even global, poetics with strong Feminist and post-colonial elements. After Riding entered his life there was no going back for Graves. From the mid-1920s on the ground was being prepared for the remarkable insights contained in *T.W.G.*. Some of those insights, it is fair to acknowledge, may even have been co-authored with Riding.

Certainly, by the time of *T.W.G.*, Graves had come to view a range of ‘anti-poetic’ cultural trends as variations on a millennia-old spiritual, social and cultural battle between subterranean matriarchal currents and ascendant patriarchal currents. By the time of *T.W.G.*, he’d come to see secularism, scientism, Liberalism, Enlightenment values, as well as our modern obsession with economics, as but recent manifestations of nefarious experiments in thinking introduced by various ancient Greek philosophers—most particularly Plato, the Neo-Platonists and Aristotle. He would eventually come to see certain mythological/spiritual mutations that began in the late 2nd millennium BCE, as the start of the eclipse of psycho-spiritually healthier polytheistic Goddess traditions that he believed had once dominated in Europe, the Middle East and north Africa. The 19th century Romantics were largely, of course, oblivious to the gender dimensions underpinning key historic cultural paradigm shifts so Graves’ insights and renovations here when adapted to the history of literature were bound to be ground-breaking.

Graves’s uniqueness as a poetics theorist then, was to merge 19th century Romantic and Neoromantic cultural critiques *with* feminist and also often unacknowledged existentialist cultural critiques (since it seems that Graves largely acquired his existentialism through Nietzsche). Both of these elements to his thinking were evident before he took up with Riding, but there is no doubt that her more nuanced and psychological perspective on gender relations and cultural history helped refine for literary audiences key aspects of Graves’ perspectives on the work of Harrison, Bachofen, etc.

¹¹ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Seizin Press, 1927.

¹² R.P. Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years With Laura 1926-40*, p. 44 (Papermac, 1991).

‘What is Left of the Beloved’: Reasons to Continue Writing Poetry After the Muse Abdicates

In 1941 poet, writer and thinker, Laura Riding—Graves’s lover, collaborator and Muse from the mid-1920s until 1939 or so—decided to renounce poetry. When—many years later—she decided to go public about her reasons for doing this, we sense that her views about the social and cultural limitations of poetry as a truth-telling activity were behind the decision, and this put her at odds with Graves’s long-held opinions about the special value of poetry. Some scholars have suggested that Riding’s implicit, mid-to-late life, critiques of poetry, poets and literary culture generally, had a deep impact on Graves, accustomed as he was in the 1920s and 30s to interpreting her decisions and utterances with something approaching religious awe. Coming on top of her rejection of him—her ‘abdication’ as his Muse, as he put it later—her ‘renunciation of poetry’ perhaps represented something close to an existential crisis for Graves. It was a crisis, we note, centred, in particular, on his self-identity as a poet.

The backdrop, then, to the writing of *The White Goddess* in the mid-1940s, is not only Riding’s departure from his life, but his loss of her as a gifted and innovative fellow poet and intellectual collaborator. They were no longer on the same creative wavelength, and Graves, by this time in mid-life, was obliged to continue on (or not) as a poet, and as a man, without her. Can we suggest that the challenge of Riding’s ‘renunciation of poetry’—as well as her absence from his life—along with the horrors of WW2 (which, for Graves, surely triggered bitter memories of WW1) and the challenges posed by his having had to flee Majorca in 1936), combined to force Graves to rethink, at the deepest level imaginable, his ‘personal poetics’ during these years? *The White Goddess* is certainly a ‘defence of poetry’ in the face of the social and political calamities of the first half of the 20th century, as well as a critique of society’s devaluation of poetry’s worth. These facets to the *W.G.* project can be affirmed. However, the imperative of defending poetry’s value and importance to individuals and society in the face of Riding’s abandonment of the craft, was also, surely, a prime, though perhaps partially unconscious, motivation for him writing the book.

If Riding had articulated to Graves, either during or after their split, her later publicly announced beliefs that poetry lacked the high cultural seriousness she felt the need to commit to at that time in her life—she eventually found it in a philosophy (or science) of language instead—then is it too much of a stretch to suggest that her renunciation called for a renewed effort on his part to articulate more clearly the high seriousness he intuitively associated with poetry (we note he’d long considered writing poetry as the primary ‘calling’ of his life)? *The White Goddess* might then be seen, at least in part, as the most serious ‘defence of poetry’ Graves could muster at the time to answer Riding’s charge that it was, on the whole, incapable of high moral and cultural seriousness.

The irony here, however, is that he seems to have used, and then transformed and re-contextualised, certain elements of Riding’s mid-1930s poetics as he went about re-justifying to himself, the world (and perhaps to Riding?) the high seriousness of poetry.

Is *W.G.*, then, at least in part, a melancholy plea to Riding to return to poetry? There is also the possibility—at least initially—that by including, but developing and re-contextualising, elements of Riding’s poetics for inclusion in *W.G.*, Graves was trying to honour her and her ideas. There are, of course, several other alternative readings possible here. Was Graves sorting through his intellectual debt to Riding during the early 1940s, and thus, is there a degree of ‘self-assertion’ evident in terms of outlining the distinctiveness of his own poetic in comparison to Riding’s? There might also be some element of ‘defiance’ and even an attempt at exacting ‘intellectual revenge’ (which Riding certainly accused him of) motivating his reworking and re-contextualisation of some elements of her poetic—as delineated, most clearly, in *The Word Woman* MS (left behind in Majorca by Riding in 1936, and spared from the flames by Robert and/or Beryl

upon their return to Majorca in the mid-1940s, but not published by Riding until decades later).

I suspect we will never know the full story, but if Graves did intend to honour Riding, or call her back to either poetry or himself (or both), his actions in writing and publishing *W.G.* achieved exactly the opposite effect. After its publication, Riding became progressively more hostile to Graves, his *W.G.* poetics and all that he stood for as a literary figure, culminating in her blistering attack on both the book and the man in her 1975 piece (included as an Appendix to *The Word Woman*) 'Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*'. I want to acknowledge, but look past to some extent, the personal dimensions to Riding's remarkable piece. Suffice to say that it would be difficult to find a more excoriating prose assault by a poet-writer on a former lover, fellow writer-poet and former literary collaborator. The highly personal nature of the attack perhaps affirms the theories of some commentators that by the 1970s, Riding was indeed acting as Graves's self-appointed 'nemesis'. Whether he deserved, partially deserved, or did not deserve at all Riding's attack I will leave to the various biographers to discuss and debate.¹³

For our purposes, it is informative that several of Riding's critical comments concerning the ideas contained in *W.G.* affirm that despite Riding suggesting Graves had taken 'discreet and serious advantage of what was to be got from me' (p.207, 'Appendix' *The Word Woman*), Riding also seems to reject most of the theories presented by Graves in *W.G.* by suggesting that they were either a 'distortion'—to the point of unrecognizability—of her earlier ideas, or were merely empty theatrics on his part (she wrote: 'a foamy grandiose effusion of nothingish spiritualistics', complete with 'glittering expanses of shallow poetic theorising', p. 208). What emerges from her various critiques of *W.G.* and Graves's work generally, is confirmation that the two poets had taken quite different directions in terms of poetics, since Riding was loath to commit to any of Graves's *W.G.* poetics, much less his 'religion of the Muse-goddess' ideas, even though she simultaneously argued that he'd 'sucked, bled, squeezed, plucked, picked, grabbed, dipped, sliced, carved, lifted, out of the body of my work' (p. 208). The truth-telling through language path Riding committed to after her split with Graves was inherently moral, rational and philosophic, and represented to her a path of 'high seriousness' that she could no longer locate in poetry. By 1975, certainly, but perhaps after her very first reading of *W.G.*, it is clear she had no sympathy whatsoever for the 'mystical-mythological hodge-podge' she encountered in *W.G.*

If Graves had adopted—with increasing fervour throughout the 1940s—a 'Poetics of Origins' that located a 'back-wall' for 'authentic', poetry as well as the human imagination, in cultures such as that of Minoan Greece, Sumeria, megalithic Britain, etc., Riding was usually more interested in the contemporary situation of poetics operating in modern societies.¹⁴

There is something obvious here about the instinctive leanings of these two poets that was perhaps always obvious, even at the height of their collaboration. Graves was never really a fully signed-up 'Modernist' poet, even though the traumas of his involvement in WW1 had forced him to deal with—and at an early age—themes explored by other

¹³ I will not be examining here the details of the relational complexity associated with Riding and Graves both before and after 1939. Interested readers might like to read the various high quality full-length biographies of Graves written by Martin Seymour-Smith, Miranda Seymour and Richard Percival Graves (in three volumes). There is also Elizabeth Friedmann's biography of Riding, *A Mannered Grace: The Life of Laura (Riding) Jackson*, published in 2005. For Riding's perspective on both her own poetics and Graves's debt to her, readers are directed to her books *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings* (1993) and *The Person I Am* (Volumes 1 & 2, 2011).

¹⁴ In *The Word Woman* Riding seems to suggest that there is no lost 'utopia' between 'man' and 'woman' to recover. She writes: 'We cannot say that earliest man possessed some clear understanding, now lost, of the nature of woman.' (p.38). Also: 'So we must not be seen as examining the records in which the formation of man's present attitude to woman may be traced, and proving, by the records, that man once had an attitude to woman more consistent with her nature than his present attitude.' (p.38)

Modernist poets and writers. Consequently, his disputes with Modernist poets like Auden, Pound, Eliot and Yeats were founded on different concerns to those voiced by Riding when she critiqued the very same poets. Graves struggled with their work due to his own, instinctive, Neo-Romantic leanings—leanings derived, in part, from his Georgian mentors and perhaps his own father. Riding, on the other hand, critiqued their work from within Modernism—rather from within Modernism’s epistemological obsession with ‘truth’, existential ‘authenticity’, etc. Graves certainly absorbed and tried on, for a time, Riding’s unique brand of poetic Modernism, but after her departure in 1939 other instinctive aspects to his creative personality resurfaced, in particular, his long fascination with the poetic dimensions of Celtic, Greek, Hebrew, Roman, etc. mythologies and folklore traditions.

The long-standing differences between the two poets are perhaps best summarized by Riding’s long-term adoption, for the most part, of *verse libre* writing techniques. She was also a highly experimental poet, unafraid to transcend traditional poetic forms in ways we now associate with some of the most experimental Modernist, and even Postmodern, poets. A number of her works are virtually unclassifiable in terms of the expectations of traditional writing ‘genres’. Graves, on the other hand, wrote almost all of his poetry using traditional forms and techniques.

After the two parted company in 1939, Graves quickly worked to expand early 20th century Neo-Romantic poetics well beyond the utopian Medieval obsessions we encounter in many 19th century Romantics. Riding, on the other hand, though interested in the ancient psycho-history of women creatives, as well as in ‘male to female’ relations in earlier cultures, was always a poet responding directly to the challenges and social conditions of the twentieth century.

In truth the differences here between the two poets involve deep metaphysical questions. One senses that Graves believed in a kind of socio-cultural ‘Fall’—for gender relations as recorded in epochal religious changes—from a prior paradisiacal (or utopian) Goddess dominant social state. This tendency to look to the past for a paradise he inherited from 19th Century Romanticism (though the Gender equality issue was not to the fore there) and its specific Celtic revivalist offshoots, as well as from his own desire to shatter and then replace (with what he hoped would be a more historically accurate ‘Origins/Creation’ story) the millennia long cultural ‘spell/curse’ of the Judeo-Christian ‘Fall narrative’ concerning Eve’s submission to the devil in the Garden of Eden. Indeed Graves reworks all the Monotheistic stories concerning Creation and the entry of evil, suffering, sexual guilt/temptation and sin into the world, by outlining an earlier Fall story also of great metaphysical seductiveness.

Riding, ever a Modernist poet and thinker, refused to buy into Graves’s refurbished Fall narrative fully, instead, as far as I can tell, she opted for more individualist (I would even say unconsciously existentialist/humanist) notions that every human being, at every moment of life faces choices that might be classified as either personally conformist or personally authentic. I get the impression from Riding’s work that myriad social and natural forces could derail individuals from their primary life task of living each moment authentically; so for her, I suspect, the problem of a ‘Fall’ is ever before us, whatever our gender. The possibility of experiencing something approaching ‘a Fall’ is thus best articulated as primarily a problem of the present and the future.

If we look at Graves’s argument here compared to Riding’s we also note that hers was more concerned with the individual—though she obviously accepted the notion that social morality codes are powerful forces impacting on individuals. Graves, on the other hand, emphasised the power of social and cultural collectives more, and then introduced a suppressed socio-cultural (but also highly personal) spiritual intermediary—the ‘Triple Muse Goddess’—into processes of personal disentanglement from an artist’s personal experience of the consequences of Graves’s version of ‘the Fall’. The ‘choice’ he asked individual artists to make (to attain a version of redemption/salvation) was thus

essentially spiritual and mytho-poetically regressive, whereas the ‘choice’ Riding might have asked people to make was largely psychological (i.e. governed by secular psychological forces in individuals).

We know that Riding was averse to the kinds of ‘iconographic’ thinking we usually associate with religion (particularly Christianity) and thus disputed Graves’s notion that a supernatural entity might enter mortal women in order to inspire and redeem male poets.¹⁵ At least in her later life, she tended to insist on the historic reality of real women (and men), and felt that Graves’s belief in an archaic Muse ‘deification’ process—at least in the way he presented it in *W.G.*—was one of the chief crimes committed in the book.¹⁶ The confusion between Graves’s understanding of what Riding meant when she described herself (as early as the late 1920s) as both a ‘finality’ and ‘like a goddess’ and what Riding actually meant by such statements is surely at the root of her eventual attack on *The White Goddess*. Graves interpreted such statements in traditional terms, i.e. that she believed herself to be an actual incarnation of an ancient female deity. Riding, however, clearly used the term ‘a finality’ in complex ways, and consequently believed that Graves had simplified and distorted (in *T.W.G.*) her ideas about the lessons modern men and women might learn from pre-patriarchal religious traditions featuring goddesses. She also felt that ultimately *T.W.G.*, misrepresented what she’d been saying about the proper relations between men and women.

That many commentators and friends also understood Riding to be Graves’s template for his powerful, sometimes cruel, and even blood-thirsty on occasion, ‘Muse-Goddess’ infuriated her still further. Her perspectives on all of this were eventually published in *The Word “Woman” and Other Related Writings*:

The wickedness of *The White Goddess* performance is not just in the large-scale appropriation of my ideas of the relation of poetry to the spiritual instincts of truth and the spiritual intuitions of articulate human participation in the cosmic reality; or in application of my findings of significances concerning cosmic forces in the character of personal difference exemplified in woman-identity and man-identity, and my principles of moral value for the poetic linguistic effort, and my visionary description of the universal story in terms of personal sense of being of it, and *in* it. [...] The centre of the wickedness is the effort [to ...] distort the personal character of myself in the malignant version of revered, loyally hated, goddess muse ... (p.209)

Perhaps the difficulty for Riding in all of this, is that her essentially Modernist intellectual opaqueness, complexity and disinterest (overall) in literary celebrity and reputation-building proved no match for Graves’s relatively straightforward revival of traditional forms of Goddess worship (despite the obvious complexity of *T.W.G.*’s overall argument). His nose for ‘giving audiences what they wanted’, i.e. for entertaining them as he educated them, and for couching his books in easy to understand and absorb—but nevertheless highly poetic—language, was a major source of the popular appeal of *T.W.G.* Such skills were honed, no doubt, from writing numerous highly successful historical novels.

Riding’s long essay, *The Word “Woman”*, written in the mid-1930s, however, is a fascinating exploration of some of the social and gender-related forces behind the triumph of male dominated ideas about divinity. It also parallels, though from different

¹⁵ Richard Graves in *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (p.62) and in *Robert Graves: The Years With Laura* (p.191) suggests that in 1932 Graves stated that he believed Laura Riding to be a modern incarnation of the Goddess Isis.

¹⁶ Richard Graves, in *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (p.71-72) writes that in 1928 ‘Riding had revealed to Graves that she was more than human. She could be thought of, if he liked, as a goddess: she was certainly a figure of destiny or, as she herself preferred to say, she embodied finality. Soon he had begun describing her as [...] an incarnation of the Goddess Isis...’

perspectives, a number of the themes that eventually featured in *T.W.G.*. Chapter 3 of the piece provides some context for what she may have meant when she described herself to Graves—and others—as ‘a finality’. We note immediately, however, that she is largely discussing the historical reality of how ordinary men and women have manifested to each other in various epochs, i.e. her argument is largely sociological and philosophical.

Man exists, indeed, by reason of his perceptions; man is a derivative being. Woman is a source—a source with all its derivatives. (*The Word “Woman”*, p. 40)

Historical and socio-cultural processes related to the development of civilization contribute to a situation whereby man, the ‘derivative being’, attempts to split himself off from the ‘source’, i.e. womankind. This leads to ‘man’ developing an obsession with constructing a ‘rationalised description, an interesting lie’ about himself, all the time thinking he can detach himself without injury, from womankind. According to Riding, this becomes a largely narcissistic narrative of ‘self-consciousness’ and ever-increasing, but self-deceptive, ‘self-importance’. She states: ‘The fact “Woman” came to be conditioned by the idea “Man”.’ (p. 40) For the rest of the book Riding’s text develops this central argument and concludes with a statement in which the ‘finality’ of ‘woman’ comes to symbolize a primary trait of both historical cultural representations of her *and* individual manifestations of her as living beings in history.

Riding’s argument is nuanced, intricate, sociological and philosophical in nature. If she did state to Graves that she was ‘more than human’ and a kind of ‘finality’, and also if *The Word “Woman”*, as published in the 1970s, can be taken as an accurate snapshot of Riding’s thoughts circa 1935 or so, then clearly there was an entire system of thought in play when she labelled herself ‘a finality’. Certainly, according to Riding, at key stages in the development of civilization the facts of historic Goddess traditions might represent an existential threat to man’s rational narratives, self-deceptions, self-importance and self-consciousness. Overall, however, she is advocating a more complex, or at the very least, a different, socio-cultural remedy for the ‘patriarchal’ mindset compared to the remedy we find in *T.W.G.*

[Man] must find a place in this whole if he is to find a place at all ... Woman, in flaunting the female mask before him ... is helping him to remember his geography: that he stands impossibly between woman the different appearance and woman the inescapable finality with which his own difference must be made compatible. (*The Word “Woman”*, p.121)

When Riding described Graves’s outline of the Triple Goddess as ‘Frankenstein’s monster’ and ‘an abomination’ she was explicitly critiquing his attempts to define primordial womankind (and the Muse Goddess/Triple Goddess) in terms of his own ambivalent feelings about Riding. However, the problem, as we’ve seen already in an earlier chapter, is in part anthropologically derived.

Graves brought three key elements together in his elaboration of the ‘cruel’ side to the Muse-Goddess: 1) Fraser’s over-use of the ‘sacrificial king’ concept as a key component of matrilineal societies; 2) Graves’s own sense of psychological abandonment, and pain, at the loss of Riding in the late-1930s to early-1940s; and 3) His unconscious linking of this pain and loss to violent mythopoetic imagery possibly influenced by the other great trauma experience of his life, i.e. the mass slaughter of young men on the battlefields of WW1. The result is a ‘Gothic-Romantic’ subtext to both *T.W.G.* and the figure of the Muse-Goddess. Riding comments instinctively on the Gothic dimension to Graves manoeuvre when she compares his ‘White Goddess’/‘Muse-Goddess’ to ‘Frankenstein’s monster’. Obviously, although Gothic supernatural tropes add thrilling plot elements, as well as suspense, to popular fiction texts, they are

undoubtedly problematic additions to a serious study of the historic truth-telling dimensions to 'authentic poetry'. More importantly, linking such tropes to Riding, does come across to impartial observers as an 'act of revenge' on Graves's part, even though he told others that the book honoured both Riding and the Muse-Goddess.¹⁷

Arising out of Riding's critiques and long-term collaboration with Graves from the mid-1920s to the end of the 1930s we might float briefly several important questions: What sort of 'Muse Goddess' and 'Triple Goddess' figures emerge (if any!) when we adjust Graves's rendition of these figures in the light of some of Riding's criticisms? Secondly, what are the consequences for poets, poetry, poetics and ideas about human creativity should some of Riding's insights be applied? Finally, in applying such hypothetical revisions, would the enchanting/magical and inspirational core to the book be strengthened and preserved, or would the book suddenly become disenchanted and lifeless?

Obviously, a full and systematic appraisal of Riding's critiques of *T.W.G.*, as well as the complexities of her views about 'primordial womankind' and the 'Muse-Goddess'—and also about a poet's relationship with such figures—lies outside the scope of this book. However, I suspect deeper analysis of her thoughts on these subjects might create the conditions for a fascinating alternative poetics, one perhaps less enslaved to Neo-Romanticism and mid-20th century gender norms, and more relevant to a range of Modernist and Postmodernist literary developments—in particular, the so-called Anti-colonial (Postcolonial), Ethnopoetics, Origins Poetics, Eco-poetics, Mythopoetic feminist and mainstream and existentialist Feminist literary initiatives of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

An outline of Riding's true thoughts on such topic belongs, then, to a yet unwritten study assessing, firstly, her actual arguments in *The Word "Woman"*, and secondly, her contributions to, and divergences from, the various components of the theory outlined by Graves in *T.W.G.*, 'The Black Goddess' (essay) and in his other shorter works on the general theory and its origins and development. I suspect such a study would need to be tentative in its conclusions, in part due to the apparently contradictory positions held by Riding across her adult life concerning the value to modern poets of ancient mythologies, generally, and female-centred mythological systems, in particular. Such a study, however, would undoubtedly uncover many insights and literary treasures.

Conclusion: After the 'Abdication' Graves Moves From Neo-Romanticism to an Internationalist 'Origin Poetics' with Mythopoetic Feminist Elements

Roughly one-third of *The White Goddess* contains writings that might be described as extraneous material further outlining Graves's mid-life 'poetics'. These writings are largely contained in the sections following the completion of the historical argument about the religious secrets linked to the *Cad Goddeau* and *The Hanes Taliesin*. In the explanatory writings we begin to see that in the early 1940s Graves was engaged in a vast 'sorting through' process to do with categorizing great poems as well as iconic poets of the entire Western tradition as either: a) 'true' to the Muse Goddess, or b) dismissive of the Muse Goddess (thus 'Apollonian' or 'inauthentic/untrue'). It is also in these chapters of *T.W.G.* that we perceive the differences between Graves's understanding of 'Modernism' and the poetic Modernisms of other leading English language poets of the early-to-mid twentieth century e.g. Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Auden, Stein, Riding (of course), Yeats, and so on.

Graves's poetry and outlook certainly contained Modernist elements linked to: 1) a kind of personal existentialism, or commitment to personal authenticity (derived in part

¹⁷ Laura Riding, *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings* (p.208).

from his WW1 experiences and regrets, and also to Riding's early influence on him); and 2) a kind of literary and cultural internationalism and even cultural globalism that sets his work apart from the largely nationalist poetics of earlier eras. Likewise, the ideologies he expressed some sympathy for, e.g. what are now labelled 'mythopoetic feminism' and 'post-colonialism' (both of which arose out of his deep respect for ancient creative traditions). Both contribute to the internationalism in his poetry, novels and nonfiction works.

Nevertheless, Graves is wary of poetic modernism, and after losing his chief collaborative critic (i.e. Riding) in the project of formulating balanced (most of the time) critiques of the poetry of Modernism's major poetic luminaries he had to think much more deeply about his own perspective on the poetics of both the various 'Modernisms' and the poetics of earlier eras and movements. Certainly *T.W.G.* is central to this project, but it is a process Graves undertakes after the calamity of WW2 and the personal dismay he felt after witnessing Riding—with whom he'd shared and co-articulated thoughtful critiques of the general direction of Modernist poetry—suddenly abandon the discipline altogether to pursue what Graves could only have seen as a largely 'Apollonian' philosophical search for truth in language.