

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 8: The Work of Primordial Poets: Toxic Emotions, Catharsis, and the Perils of the Soul



The image above (entitled 'Toxic Emotions and the Rites of Catharsis', 2023) is my own. All quotes and extracts from texts, etc. consulted for inclusion in the work are included 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.

Philosophic and Theological Wars on Emotion: Censoring Catharsis and Transcending Toxic Passions

1. Horror, delight, exaltation, lust, love and devotion

The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence brings.¹

The remaining two chapters of this work will highlight several absences and omissions evident in the poetics of *T.W.G.*. These chapters will also be more speculative, since in assessing Graves' treatment of phenomena associated with primordial poets and shamans, e.g. invoking emotions (both healthy and toxic), catharsis, possession (by ancestor spirits, gods or demons), and 'other-world'/'underworld' journeys we notice that Graves is either silent, or offers only brief, enigmatic and disconnected commentary on such topics. Often his comments resemble 'Gothic Horror' flourishes rather than sustained, serious analysis, and seem designed to thrill, shock or titillate readers. Only rarely does Graves work to connect these phenomena to the core poetics of *T.W.G.*. By contrast, I will argue, that these phenomena *should* be central to the poetics of *T.W.G.* and that we need to explore the wealth of anthropological evidence detailing the centrality of these phenomena to primordial creative traditions.

To give Graves his due, there are a number of descriptions of various powerful, uncanny and even terrifying emotions in *T.W.G.* (typically experienced by poets as the Triple Goddess begins to 'possess' a Muse-vessel). We also note that Graves discusses important differences between philosophic valuations of such emotions, *and* poetic valuations of the same. However, Graves does not go far enough in his defense of 'primordial' poets skilled at manipulating powerful emotions/passions. Graves also had virtually nothing to say about the socially beneficial role of catharsis.

The quote from *T.W.G.* that opened this chapter places certain emotional states experienced by poets and their audiences, at the center of the book's poetics. How do we know if the Muse Goddess is present, or if a scene from the one True Theme is being presented? Primarily, we feel it and we feel it strongly:

Perfect faithfulness to the Theme affects the reader of a poem with a strange feeling, between delight and horror, of which the purely physical effect is that the hair literally stands on end.²

Once again we note Graves' use of the word 'horror'—so far he's used the words, 'delight', 'exaltation' and 'horror'—to describe both the poet's encounter with a woman carrying the Muse Goddess, and the consequence for the poet's poetry of this encounter. A few pages later Graves' expands on the emotional impact of both the Muse Goddess and poetry and song inspired by her:

The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of all Living, the ancient power of fright and lust—the female spider or the queen bee whose embrace is death.³

The words 'lust' and 'fright'—strong emotions indeed—are to be added to our list, but in this passage Graves also links these key emotions to extreme states of physical arousal: 'hairs stand on end', 'eyes water', 'throat is constricted', and 'a shiver runs down the spine'. Later in the chapter he quotes the famous line by Keats about Fanny Brawne (his Muse): 'everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear'. A little later Graves states that the heart 'leaps' in the presence of the Muse. Already, however, it is obvious that this is no simple love story—the typical sensations and feelings described in airport romances, are not those experienced in a 'poet meets Muse Goddess' romance. Only

¹ Robert Graves, p. 14, *T.W.G.*.

² Ibid. p. 21.

³ Ibid. p. 24.

the emotions of 'lust' and a 'leaping' heart seem to be shared. Other short passages dealing with emotions connected to the Triple Goddess are mentioned now and then as the book unfolds, but the references do not add much to the picture outlined in the early chapters—except that we might add several emotions to do with orgiastic lust and even blood-lust—frenzied emotions associated with participants in religious rites honouring the Goddess. He also frequently discusses the poet's 'love' for, and 'devotion' to, the Muse-vessel/Triple Goddess as well as the 'fickleness' and 'cruelty' of the Goddess toward the poet. There is nowhere the sense that the unique combination of strong emotions experienced by poets in relation to their Muses might be channeled in such a way as to benefit individuals and groups.

We are entitled to ask: Is Graves' understanding of 'emotion', i.e. as a tool of 'primordial' poets, backed up by the anthropological facts?

Graves certainly understood key elements of a poet's role in primordial societies. Perhaps he also knew something of poetry's cathartic role—heightened in the extreme when poetry is fused with music, dance, art, etc. However, the range of personal and communal poetically invoked emotions experienced by people living in animistic and matrilineal/matriarchal polytheistic cultures appear to be more varied than allowed for in *T.W.G.* Put simply, Graves tends to over-emphasise the centrality of ancient rituals involving the slaughter of male sacred kings and heroes at the hands of drugged-out packs of ecstatic ('orgiastic') priestesses. His vivid depictions of key scenes from his favoured 'primordial' myth narrative are all about invoking emotions such as fear and terror/horror in readers:

No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked-King crucified to the lopped-oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of 'Kill! kill! kill! Blood! blood! blood!'⁴

Interestingly, we note that throughout Graves' career as a poet and writer, his fiction, creative nonfiction/biography and even much of his poetry, explore various additional emotions that go unmentioned in the poetics of *T.W.G.*.

2. Reviving Mythopoetic and Magical Thinking Without a Focus on Emotions?

Before we critique Graves excessively for employing the techniques of Gothic-Horror fiction writers, we need to acknowledge that the nightmare scene depicted above—part of a supposedly primordial poetic 'ritual' sequence—perhaps arose from some fusion of elements drawn from Graves's unconscious. Clearly, his fiction writer sub-self couldn't resist bringing to life key scenes from the 'Dying God-King' narrative. However, experiences drawn from his life as a soldier may also be a background for the scene (we recall he had witnessed and participated in hand-to-hand combat in the trenches of WWI, where blood-curdling chants and acts of socially approved murder were a daily hazard). Finally, he may have felt psychologically 'sacrificed' (symbolically, anyway) by Riding after her departure from his life in 1939.

Nevertheless, what is at issue here is Graves' simplification of the communal ritualistic aspects of primordial poetry—the intricacy, diversity of purpose and seriousness with which traditional poet-priests and priestesses approached their work. It was of the utmost importance to the well-being of many Indigenous peoples that their sacred poets and shamans recited the poems, charms, curses, incantations, stories, etc. gifted to the community by supernatural personages, in specific ways at specific times of the year, life-cycle, etc. Recited/performed correctly and individuals or the tribe might feel secure about the blessings of divine entities; recited incorrectly and it was believed that some kind of spiritual malaise (curse) might be unleashed upon individuals or even the entire community.⁵

⁴ *T.W.G.* pg. 448.

⁵ Levy-Bruhl op. cit. pg. 139. 'The reason for reciting the myths or representing them ceremonially or visually as in the Karadjeri rock-art, is in order to bring about what is called increase ... By carrying out the prescribed procedures they aspire to make [increase] certain.'

Many of the myth cycles, for example, upon which Hesiod and the Orphic mystery cults drew, involved dramatically acted out ritual narratives participated in by worshippers of specific deities later associated with the poetry, drama and other art forms.⁶

Graves has much to say in *T.W.G* about the divinities overseeing the arts in various traditional cultures, but the exact mechanisms by which poets maintained balance between individuals, society, divinities and the cosmos is not explored to any depth. Nor does Graves present a clear outline for how a revived primordial poetic could act as an antidote to the many ills of modern civilization beyond statements about: a) the benefits of reviving mythopoetic thinking and magic; b) the benefits sure to accrue after reviving ancient Goddess narratives; and c) the benefits that accrue to individuals when we subject our lives to the moral imperatives of the Triple Goddess. We are thus implored to revive the Goddess without knowledge of the cathartic healing practices long associated with recitations and performances of 'sacred poetry'.

Likewise, the diverse exorcistic and Aversive rites (i.e. 'to avert evil, suffering and bad luck') practiced by shamans and poets in various primordial cultures do not appear to be part of the revival.⁷ Graves offers us only a smattering of comments acknowledging the link between primordial poetry and the defeat and banishment of evil spirits. Such nefarious spirits, in many traditions, were believed to be able to possess a person by harming, fragmenting or stealing the person's soul (however it was understood in specific traditions). Frazer, for example, devoted a significant chunk of *The Golden Bough* to this phenomenon.⁸ A true understanding of the Medieval and Early Modern witch-hunts, for example, begins with an awareness of the concept of the fragility of the soul when combatting supernatural entities that are animated by 'evil intentions and emotions' projected at victims through curses, spells, the Evil Eye, etc.. In summary: Graves calls for the revival of only selective aspects of a fundamental strata of ancient mythology and folk religion linked to the Triple Goddess. Absent from the revival is the poet's acknowledged primordial role in combatting toxic emotions and malicious spirits.

The mid-2nd millennium BCE philosophic assault on '*muthos*', i.e. the mythic, spoken, chanted, or incanted part of a ritual, was equally an attack on the '*dromenon*' or enacted part (i.e. 'the thing done'). According to Harrison, the various seasonal festivals of Ancient Greece—e.g. the *Anthesteria* (or late January to early February) and the *Diasia* of spring; the *Thargeli*, *Kallynterea* and *Plynteria* of the harvest season; the *Thesmophoria* of autumn, etc.—had ritualistic, purificatory and aversive elements aimed at warding off various entities associated with mythic evil and misfortune (conceived of as various types of *Keres* and *Erinyes*).⁹

The various rites involved in exorcising spirits of disease, madness, spiritual unease, bad dreams, etc. involved inducing states of emotional frenzy so that a stolen, damaged, fragmented or imprisoned 'soul' could be returned to the body. Only by understanding this dramatically induced 'psycho-spiritual crisis', can we understand the full cultural impact of philosophical attempts to redefine poetry and divinity along more rational and Monist lines.

Graves wrote more extensively about the psycho-spiritual processes by which 'sacred poets' receive their songs, poems, stories, etc. from Muses and gods, (the principles he describes also hold for inspirational ancestor spirits, totemic beings, etc.) Likewise, he understood that poetry, music, dance etc. could be used effectively to summon divinities. However, the summoning of divinities need not always be a dramatic affair—many descriptions of divine possession seem to document a strangely routine and everyday activity. Eliade's account of Maori and Polynesian possession experiences is typical of a more routine (though still somewhat emotionally alarming) side to a world-wide phenomenon:

⁶ Harrison, op. cit. *Prolegomena to Greek Religion* and *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*. Also, H. W. Parke, *Greek Oracles* [op. cit.]; L. H. Martin, *Studies in Hellenistic Religions* [OUP 1987, N.Y.] especially Ch. 3 'The Mysteries and the Sovereignty of the Feminine'; John Ferguson's work on ancient Greek religion, i.e. *Among the Gods: An Archaeological Exploration of Ancient Greek Religion* [Routledge, N.Y. 1982], as well as Karl Kerényi's works (listed in the bibliography) are also useful here.

⁷ Harrison, op. cit. *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pg. 163. "[Early Greek religious] ritual was mainly characterised by what we may call the 'turning away', i.e. the 'aversion' of evil." See also Evans Pritchard's work on the Azande in *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, ed. Max Marwick, Penguin, London, 1972.

⁸ James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 13 Volumes, specifically: [Vol. III] Part II. *Taboo and the perils of the soul*. 1911.

⁹ Harrison. op. cit. *Prolegomena*, chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5.

The Maori term *waka* clearly indicates that the inspired man carries the god in him as a canoe carries its owner. The manifestations of the incarnation of the god or spirit resemble those observed everywhere else. After a preliminary stage of calm concentration comes a frantic state during which the medium speaks in a falsetto voice interrupted by spasms; his words are oracular and determine the action to be taken.¹⁰

Here, also, is Deren describing a typical cult gathering prior to human dancers becoming possessed by '*loa*'—i.e. Voodoo deities. A range of artistic/creative elements including poetry/chanting, comedy, dance, music and story-telling are used by *houngans* to entice the gods to the gathering:

The chorus fluctuates in strength and intensity as its attention is transferred to some ceremonial activity, or as a number of the *houngans* (cult members) become pre-occupied with one among them who is being possessed ... At other times the *houngan* (priest) ... leads the songs to a *loa* (god) who has particular personal relevance for him. One hears, intermittently, the cackling of chickens, which are to be sacrificed, the crowing of a rooster ...¹¹

Various creative, social and sacrificial elements are apparently fused, in order to achieve specific sacred goals. Deren was ever conscious of the tribal drums willing the dancers onward, hour upon hour, into 'the White Darkness', i.e. the moment of becoming possessed by a *loa*.

2. Toxic and Healthy Emotions, Catharsis and the Religion of the Goddess

W. B. Stanford, in *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions*, organises a great deal of material (derived from classical sources) concerning the poet's primary role in Classical Greek society. He seems to suggest that in the centuries preceding the birth of 'Tragedy' as a literary form, poets were considered to be semi-divine mediators between humans and the Gods.¹² Clearly, a degree of religious *mana* still clung to the dramatist/poets themselves, the dramatic performances and printed versions of ancient Greek plays. Anyone visiting the ruins of the ancient theatre at the foot of the Acropolis will notice that the head priest of the theatre's Dionysian cult occupied a sumptuous front-row seat (something like a throne). Stanford's book is important since Graves was extremely familiar with ancient Greek mythology, religion and literature—indeed the tradition is a key feeder into the poetics of *T.W.G.*.

According to Stanford, the ability to manipulate a variety of sacred emotions through works and performances of poetry, drama, music, etc. was the prime measure of a poet's expertise. His work (which was first published in 1983, i.e. after Graves' working life had ended) represents a catalogue of the prime emotional states worked up by the poets and is invaluable reading alongside ancient philosophic criticisms of poetic and dramatic invocations of emotions and passions.¹³

As Stanford documents, Herodotus, Polybius, Longinus, Horace, Lucian, Dion of Prusa (32, 55-56 and 74), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Demosthenes* 32), Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* 5.5) and many others commented on both the positive and negative aspects of the capacity of artists to arouse extreme emotion.¹⁴ Most, however, were really critiquing the primordial religious goals of the process.

Stanford also discusses Aristotle's detailed theorizing on the value of the emotions to poets, dramatists, musicians and rhetoricians as found in *The Art of Rhetoric* and *The Nichomachean Ethics*. He also explores in depth the philosopher's theory of catharsis as it functions in Tragedy,

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, pg. 37.

¹¹ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti*, pg. 237. [Thames and Hudson, Reprint. 1970, 1953].

¹² Jane Harrison also suggested that this was a development of more ancient perceptions of the poet's divine prerogative. See Jane Harrison, *Themis*, particularly Chapt. 9, 'From Daimon to Olympian' and Chapt. 10, 'The Olympians.'

¹³ W. B. Stanford, *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions*, especially Chapt. 3.

¹⁴ *ibid.* Chapter 1, of Stanford, i.e. 'The Centrality of Emotions.'

as found in Aristotle's *The Poetics*.¹⁵

Let us take a moment to define the idea in terms of traditional Aristotelian poetic goals. Gassner's essay on Aristotle's famous declarations concerning 'catharsis' (found in *The Poetics*) helps to illuminate the relationship between emotional catharsis and the social and cultural value of emotional release.¹⁶ In terms of traditional societies we must remember that the emotions being invoked by the poets are sacralised, that is, imbued with the sacred mana of divine forces. This fact is not emphasized in Aristotle's work—he was, after all, a rational philosopher. However, his approach is as close as we get, in early Classical Age philosophy, to a significant defense of poets and their ability to conjure powerful states of feeling:

In the tragic experience we temporarily expel troublesome inner complications. We expel pity and fear, to use Aristotle's terms, and the terms are broad enough to cover most pathological or near pathological elements—namely anxieties, fears, morbid grief or self-pity, sadistic or masochistic desires, and the guilt that these engender and are engendered by. In a successful tragedy we see these drives enacted on the stage directly or through their results by characters with whom we can identify ourselves. They are proxies so as to speak ... the expulsion would certainly prove ephemeral and perhaps even incomplete and/or ineffective if the expelled *matter* were merely brought to the surface (to our preconscious if you will) instead of being fully recognised by our consciousness.¹⁷

It is important to remind readers that primordial—meaning here simply pre-Classical Age Greek—mythological understandings of 'catharsis', i.e. the purging of repressed negative energy, was not understood as a merely emotional experience. The prevalent paradigms tended to view 'toxic emotions' in terms of the presence in or near individuals of either evil spirit entities; the 'substance of evil' or misfortune, witch substance, etc.—i.e. psychic and spiritual energies specifically tied to supernatural entities, spirits or gods. In this milieu 'catharsis' is really a kind of routine form of 'exorcism'—or at minimum it is part of a ritual of Aversion.

Scheff's fascinating work *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama* (1979) also offers us a useful definition of 'catharsis' whilst linking it to: 1. various modern psychological theories; 2. to the religious rituals of various primordial cultures; and to 3. powerful emotional experiences associated with theatre and modern mass entertainments:

When we cry over the fate of Romeo and Juliet, we are reliving our own personal experiences of overwhelming loss, but under new and less severe conditions. The experience of vicarious loss, in a properly designed drama, is sufficiently distressful to awaken the old distress. It is also sufficiently vicarious, however, so that the emotion does not feel overwhelming. The balance between distress and security, which I will refer to as distancing, will be a central theme of this book. I will argue that cathartic crying, laughing, and other emotional processes occur when an unresolved emotional distress is reawakened in a properly distanced context.¹⁸

Gassner too, seeks to formulate standards by which we might gauge the success or otherwise of the cathartic 'purgation' process described by Aristotle. He highlights the factor of post-cathartic 'enlightenment', which roughly corresponds to Jungian concepts like 'insight' and 'transcendence'. We are in the realms of therapeutics, self-help and spiritual or personal growth. The ability to measure the degree of insight triggered by a cathartic experience associated with, say, witnessing a play or listening to poetry or music, would (idealistically speaking) help us to better define 'true poetry'. We might ask: does the dramatic, poetic or musical experience rid the audience of anxieties? Introducing the post-catharsis experiences of 'insight' and 'enlightenment' to Aristotle's theorizing also effectively rules out expressions of mass emotion such as were

¹⁵ *ibid*, pgs. 17-18 and 21-48, of W. B. Stanford, *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions*, [R. K. P., London, 1983.]

¹⁶ Gassner, 'Catharsis and Modern Theatre,' in *Aristotle's Poetics and English Literature*, pg.108-113.

¹⁷ *ibid*, pg. 109.

¹⁸ Scheff, 'Introduction', p. 13, of *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama* (1979), University of California Press.

critiqued by Orwell in the 'Hate Hour' (see 1984), as well as the 'Feely/Movie' experiences described by Huxley in *Brave New World*. The kind of emotional outbursts popular at sports events also typically lack post-catharsis 'insight'.

The debate about the benefits or otherwise of 'catharsis' has raged in modern times within various humanities and social science disciplines. There is not the space here to revisit the various arguments, however, it is enough to emphasise the importance of the phenomenon to historic understandings of the efficacy and social worth, or otherwise, of ancient rituals as well as literary poetic, musical and narrative events. Scheff's definition, above, which is informed by both Aristotle and the early Freud, is probably the most useful for the purposes of our revision to Graves' poetics, though it is only fair to re-state that in *T.W.G.*, Graves has little to say about Aristotle's concept of 'catharsis'. Nor did Graves have much positive to say about psychoanalysis—whether of Freudian, Jungian or Neo-psychoanalytic persuasion.

To summarise: shamanic, dramatic, ritualistic and other forms of catharsis, are not described by Graves as systematic tools of the Triple Goddess. Nor do they seem relevant to his unacknowledged system of 'love mysticism'. The *T.W.G.*, emphasizes but a small number of emotions, and they are largely linked to manifestation of the Muse-Goddess as she possesses human vessels—many other emotions routinely manipulated by ancient poets and dramatists are all but ignored. However, these tools of sacred and semi-sacred poets and dramatists were often of fundamental importance to artistic experiences in many primordial spiritual traditions. Graves' omissions perhaps explain why he makes so few medicinal/healing or personal growth claims for poetry. Quite clearly, a few lines on a page, however imbued with the magical *mana* of the Triple Goddess, can have only a limited impact on an audience in comparison to shamanic and dramatic ceremonies involving invocation, divine possession, ego-annihilation, catharsis, exorcism, etc..¹⁹

4. The Roots of the Problem: The Philosophical War on Emotions and Catharsis

Graves' criticism of Plato's attacks on poetry tend to limit discussion of the anti-poetic elements in Plato's work to a discussion of Myth (the domain of poets) *versus* Rational Philosophy (the domain of philosophers and, later, monotheistic theologians). His critiques of *The Republic* and *The Symposium*, for example, fail to make several crucial points because he tends to dodge key elements of Plato's ancient argument against poets and dramatists. Certainly, Plato—taking a lead from Socrates—was against the mythopoeic dimensions to poetry (because to him the Gods, as depicted in the myths, often acted in unseemly/ungodly ways), but Plato's arguments also sought to limit the ability of poets to influence ordinary citizens through the emotions, which, according to him, poets incited and manipulated for dramatic, unseemly purposes. The main crime poets (through their poetry) perpetrated, according to Plato, was to conjure, in children, youth and citizens, excessive passions—passions so powerful they could overthrow reason.

Much of the battle between Plato, Aristotle and the poets was about the social, cultural and spiritual value of inciting powerful emotions. In Plato's *Republic*, poets are excluded from the ideal state because of the excess passions they routinely work with.²⁰ Plato wished to define the ideal state of citizenship in his ideal state along largely rational lines, consequently, any threat posed by poets to 'rational transcendence' of the passions, was to be punished by social exclusion (i.e. from his utopian 'Republic'). The work called for a major demotion of 'sacred poets' and dramatists in ancient Greek culture—in short: a war between poets and the philosophers was declared. Graves certainly critiqued Plato's proposed banishment of poets from the ideal state,²¹ but he does not critique thoroughly enough the anti-emotional core to Plato's argument.

¹⁹ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* [op. cit.] especially chapter 5, 'Wondrous Medicine.'

²⁰ Plato, *The Republic*. There are many references to the negative spiritual and social value of 'emotion' in poetry in books 2, 3 and 10. As a sample from Book 10 we read [604]: 'The element that encourages the recollection of the trouble and lamentation, and is never sated with this, is irrational, inert and associated with cowardice ...' Here poetic catharsis, with its desire to root out old griefs via emotional expression, is being alluded to. Also [606]: 'The element which is forcibly restrained in our own misfortunes, starved of tears and the satisfaction of lamentation, though it naturally desires this, is the very element which is satisfied and given pleasure by the poets.' Later in the same passage: '[Poetry] waters and nourishes the passions. It makes them our rulers.'

²¹ Graves, op. cit. *T.W.G.* pg. 10.

Let us turn to the *Republic* with these thoughts in mind. Desmond Lee in introducing Plato's section on education states the following:

What we may term secondary or literary education consisted mainly in a study of the works of the poets, which were learnt to be recited and where necessary sung to the lyre ... It must be remembered that the Greeks had no Bible, and what the Bible has been to us as a source of theology and morals, the poets were to the Greeks.²²

Lee goes on to summarise Plato's central concerns as follows:

If we were to educate the young properly, we must make sure that the poetry upon which they are brought up is suitable for the purpose. Most existing poetry is unsuitable; a) theologically, because it misrepresents god. God is perfectly good, and therefore changeless and incapable of deceit, and must never be otherwise represented.²³

Anybody watching performances of Euripides' tragedies would sense the powerful emotional pull of archaic religious themes on audiences. *The Bacchae* for example is associated by scholars with Dionysus and possibly with Orphism.²⁴ Plato's desire to make God rational and just in applying punishments to humans for moral wrong-doing when linked to his desire to abstract divine activities and defeminize divine entities, helped destroy the metaphysical foundations of many forms of ancient sacred poetry. In truth, the entire Aversive and Chthonic underside to Greek religion was under attack:

What the poet must not be allowed to say is that those who were punished were made wretched through God's actions. He may refer to the wicked as wretched because they need punishment, provided he makes it clear that in punishing them god did him good.²⁵

Plato also seeks to make the expression of emotion a binary, gendered phenomenon—women are declared prone to emotional extremes, whereas men are more able to think rationally and control their emotions. In the *Republic* (605-7), the 'unmanliness' of emotion unrestrained by reason is severely criticised and the poets are chastised for feminizing young men.²⁶ Book 10 (607-8) sums up Plato's obsession with poetry's emotional power:

The only poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and paeans in praise of good men; once you go beyond that and admit the sweet lyric or epic muse, pleasure and pain become your rulers instead of law and rational principles.²⁷

Whether Plato, in writing *The Republic*, was serious or not, it is obvious enough that modern Western society grows ever closer to his 'Ideal State'. Poets are typically undervalued in our modern world and are no longer at the center of cultural life. Typically, if they are badly paid—i.e. punished economically for their choice of careers.

5. A Millennia-long Prequel to the Banishment of Poets from Cultural Influence

The distribution, and even the performance, of poetry today lacks most of the necessary input elements necessary for intense sacralised emotional excitement. Graves in attempting to speak for the world's indigenous poets, nevertheless failed to advocate for the revival of sacred catharsis.

He did argue, however, that the language of worship demanded by an all-perfect male divinity was by definition anti-poetic. It was not the language of the Muse. It was not even the

²² Plato, *The Republic*, ed. Betty Radice. Explanation of books 2 and 3.

²³ *ibid.* [377]

²⁴ Alderink, *Creation and Salvation in Ancient Orphism*. especially Ch. 3, 'Anthropological Motifs in the Orphic Mysteries.' See also Harrison's chapters in *Prolegomena*.

²⁵ Plato, *op. cit.* [380].

²⁶ Plato, *op. cit.* [605-608]. *The Republic*

²⁷ *Ibid.* [607-8]. However, for discussion of the redemptive value of emotion see Homer's *The Odyssey*, Book VIII, pg. 136, Penguin, E.V. Rieu's translation, 1965.

language of Homer and the priests and priestesses of patriarchal polytheism. Plato's attack on poets invited censorship of both the imagination *and* the healing emotional functions implicit in the older religious paradigms. Plato says he wants poets to tell 'perfect tales' of a 'perfect god.' - 'we must *compel* our poets to tell children growing up such stories ...'²⁸

Graves is correct in saying that 'mythopoetic creatures of the imagination' were also banned or ridiculed by Socrates and other Classical philosophers, likewise that the nature of the gods was 'irreligiously' redefined in terms of monist and transcendental models. He is also correct when he argues that the result of this multi-pronged philosophical attack was to diminish the cultural importance of 'sacred poets' in initially ancient Greek, later Greco-Roman and, finally, general Western cultural traditions. The survival of ancient Celtic, Germanic and Norse oral traditions into and beyond the so-called 'Dark Ages', represented (according to Graves) minor bumps in the road for philosophers and theologians intent on imposing the 'religion of reason and logic' on the bulk of the European populace. Likewise, late Medieval Romanticism, part of which involved the long-running and widely influential Arthurian story cycle (as well as the troubadour traditions of that era), likewise, the Romantic movement of the late 18th and 19th centuries were also seen by Graves as set-backs for philosophers and theologians.²⁹

As the Goddesses of the ancient world faded from cultural and religious center stage so too did the centrality of the poet's role in manipulating the emotions for healthy ends. This is the reason later Monotheistic patriarchal traditions could begin to speak more often, and in blanket terms, of the 'vile passions'. The censorship of poetic themes that conjure the ancient cathartic emotions amounts to a battle between cultural and spiritual paradigms, it is also a 'War in Heaven'—as Graves named one of the chapters in *T.W.G.*—since alternative understandings of 'God' *and* the Gods are doing battle over several millennia for the hearts and minds of human beings.

Interestingly, Joseph Campbell also saw the development of patriarchal forms of spirituality—namely the very same alliance of 'paradigms' that Graves identified in *T.W.G.* as opposed to both the Triple Goddess and the activities of poets—in terms of a long-term attack on both Goddess traditions and authentic manifestations of creativity.

Our Biblical Yahweh appears in his unilluminated legend as the archetypical 'hoarder', and his mythology, consequently, is of a man's exile to an earth of dust (Gen 3; 17-18) and of spiritual silence, where no whisper may be heard of goddess or Muse [...] no one can possibly function, either as a poet or as an artist, in such a desecralised environment. The repudiated and absconded Muse of the living earth, *Surda Thalia*, must be invoked and recalled.³⁰

Plato's attempts at moral and rational critiques of dramatists, poets and poetry, once launched, became engrained in cultural elites and their attitudes toward the arts generally. Stanford tells us:

The Stoic philosophers with their doctrine of *apatheia* supported Plato in his hostility to theatrically inspired emotionalism, and some Christian apologists followed them. Tertullian in his general denunciation of public spectacles condemned tragedy's arousal of anger, grief, frenzy and similar violent emotions (*De Spectaculis* 15) ... St. Augustine in his unredeemed youth enjoyed weeping in the theatre, but later deplored such pleasures as '*turpis scabies*' i.e. a 'shameful itch' (*Confessions* 3,2).³¹

Today, then, the Western poet's role in seasonally purging the emotions is non-existent. Traditional processes of personal and social/mass catharsis are unknown. Even Aristotle's version of catharsis is out of favour among writers and literary critics. Popular entertainment and sport are the only modern experiences on offer that allow for the expression of emotion, though usually such experiences are facile and conclude without genuine post-cathartic 'insight'. More troubling still are the techniques of emotional manipulation used by populist politicians and advertisers.

²⁸ Plato, op. cit. [377; 378].

²⁹ Keith Thomas's work *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is a well-researched study dealing with the survival in folk traditions, oral story-telling and seasonal rites of key elements of earlier spiritual paradigms within Late Medieval and Early Modern European cultural formations. [Penguin, 1991, London.]

³⁰ J. Campbell, *In All Her Names* pg.89 [op. cit].

³¹ W.B. Stanford, op. cit. pg. 5.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is a need to both restate and augment Graves' position on some the concepts discussed in this chapter. The logical language developed by the early Greek philosophers not only attacked poetry and poets because of their aptitude for (unseemly) mythic story-telling, but also because of their ability to arouse and strain the *'psuches'* of their audiences to emotional breaking-point. They did this with poetic words/chants, dance rhythms, musical instruments, 'mournful tunes', theatrical masks and other art.

The cathartic release of negative spiritual energies served a clear social purpose—the goal was to make individuals and societies healthier—and was arguably fundamental to many forms of worship directed at matrilineal polytheistic and animistic spiritual entities. Developing this neglected argument gives us a more integrated vision of poetry's personal and social possibilities for healthy modern societies.

Graves certainly understood some of the negative impacts on individuals and society of anti-poetic religions and philosophies. However, these negative impacts extend further into the interior lives of individuals than even he was aware of. The vilification of catharsis, for example, impacts our ability to love and nurture, to feel affection, to be at peace in the world, to move on from suffering, and so on. The inability to sing out in sorrow when one is emotionally hurt, to express anger at injustices, to weep 'like women'—as Plato derogatively described that natural emotional function—when we are sad, allows for 'toxic emotions' (the essence of 'mythic evil') to build up in our bodies and *'psuches'*/souls. These toxins were then typically passed on from generation to generation through the institutionalization of subtle and not so subtle forms of child abuse—i.e. 'Do not spare the rod!' etc.. In the collective sense, they also remained trapped in the body politic where they facilitated aristocratic and elite fantasies of a permanently obedient lower-class. These trapped emotional toxins also fueled the innate rage and love of warfare needed for societies that needed or demanded a permanent warrior class.

Plato's approach to poetic mastery over emotion and catharsis was but part of the great paradigm shift gathering pace across the first millennium BCE. The shift, as Graves documents in *T.W.G.*, involved sustained cultural movement *away from* matrilineal polytheistic and animistic/totemic forms of religion and spirituality *toward* patriarchal, transcendent and philosophical forms.

In terms of Graves' theory of the Muse Goddess we note the gradual historic silencing of a range of ancient female deities historically associated with wisdom, learning, poetry and other creative activities, as well as with the cleansing of toxic emotions—e.g. Cerridwen (Welsh, Celt.), Bridget (Irish, Celt.), Athena (Ancient Gr.), Minerva (Roman), Seshet (Ancient Egyptian), Sophia/Zoe (Gnosticism) etc..

Today, society no longer values poetry in relation to the full range of its original social briefing and consequently the key tools of the 'sacred poet' are broken and discarded. As a replacement, the modern poet, musician, actor, writer, etc. is encouraged to become a living symbol of emotional and social dysfunction—a mere hollow celebrity, or a mass society 'spectacle' perhaps—a zoo animal, even—to be gawked at as some kind of 'warning to the timid but curious'. Likewise, the age-old shamanic myth narratives, with their emphasis on a psycho-spiritual crisis capable of gifting poets and other creatives inner peace, moral direction and special creative, magical and healing powers, are much neglected, if not completely forgotten in our era.

Let us turn in Chapter 9, our final chapter, to an outline of the 'primordial' poet's' prime creative life task—I have labelled it the Spiritual Transformation of Orpheus.