

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 70,000 words (an increase on the work's original word count).

Chapter 9: Alternative Myth Narratives for Poets: Reborn Wounded Healers



The image above (entitled 'Ascending the Tree Ladder to the Spirit World', 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.

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Primordial and Modern Rites of Transformation: Alternatives to a Poetics of Love Mysticism

Part 1: Taliesin as Ancient Welsh-British Vision Poet

Llyvyr Taliessin, then, contains in itself a complex literary and political history ... the court bard of the post-Roman period is transformed into a shaman, prophet, and sage ...¹

After reading the last chapter readers may have received the impression that vision quest experiences involving catharsis are completely absent from Graves' work—replaced, instead, by a unique form of Western 'Love Mysticism' supposedly containing ancient religious and occult undercurrents. Whilst it is true to state that the 'cathartic' element to Graves' Triple Goddess religious system is either underplayed or all-but absent from *T.W.G.*, there is one Celtic legend, perhaps involving quite ancient mythological elements, that Graves places at the very heart of his argument and that Celtic Revivalist scholars since the early 19th century, and even serious literary scholars in our time, have seen as a possible record of remnant Celtic 'vision quest' teachings (sometimes, as in the quote opening this section, they even use the terms 'shaman' and 'shamanic'). The story is doubly important because two of the key characters in *The Romance of Taliesin* are central to ancient British creative traditions—i.e. Gwion/Taliesin (master poet of the mainland British/Welsh Celtic tradition) and Cerridwen or Caridwen (according to Graves a local British version of the Triple Goddess, but also the 'Queen of the Bards, Druids', etc. according to ancient British sources).²

In the Taliesin/Cerridwen story, the figure of 'Gwion' dies in late-adolescence (i.e. is devoured by the shapeshifting Goddess Cerridwen) only to be reborn as a master poet named 'Taliesin'. The 'rending to pieces' and shapeshifting experiences described extinguish, once and for all, the poet's younger self (Gwion), replacing him with the bard of the shining brow (Taliesin) who possesses extraordinary creative, prophetic and magical powers. During this experience, Gwion/Taliesin also experiences a profound 'influx of visions' as well as prophetic knowledge that, so the legend goes, almost drove him mad and took decades to fully process. The chase sequence (interestingly Graves labels it a 'love chase sequences') at the heart of the initiation experience features strong totemic, astrological, vision quest and psychosexual elements that are difficult for modern scholars to decipher.

Clearly, the text represents something more than a standard life transition (i.e. youth to adulthood) initiatory experience, rather we are talking about a specific kind of death-rebirth initiatory experience associated with the emergence of tribal bards, *ollam*, druids, *filidh* (Ir.), etc. i.e. figures possessing 'shamanic' powers. In the Welsh terminology, these people are called the '*awenyddion*'—a term describing bardic practitioners and their pupils, as well as a bard's supernatural powers of poetic and prophetic insight).

It cannot be denied that these extraordinary poems reflect a sophisticated and complex understanding of poetic composition in which the concept of *awen* is central. It would be misleading to translate this idea of inspiration as 'Muse': it is

¹ Trans. Gwyneth Lewis and Rowan Williams, p. xxx, 'Introduction' to *The Book of Taliesin: Poems of Warfare and Praise in an Enchanted Britain*, Penguin paperback, 2020.

² Many aspects of this legend/mythic sequence are fundamental to Graves' Triple Goddess/Muse Goddess argument in *T.W.G.*, consequently, elements of the story (i.e. *The Romance of Taliesin*), as well as its key events and figures, i.e. Gwion, Taliesin, Cerridwen/Caridwen are mentioned frequently in the book. Specific references in *T.W.G.* pp. 27-40; pp.43-45; pp. 67-68; pp. 74-80; p. 98; p. 123; p. 136; p. 189; pp. 221-222; pp. 366-367; p.400; p. 420 note; p. 439-440; and p. 447.

better thought of as a state of altered consciousness in which the poet receives knowledge of matters beyond what can be routinely learned. According to Gerald of Wales's description of the *awenyddion*, or inspired soothsayers, of the twelfth century, the gift of *awen* produces the same kinds of extreme behavior as are associated with spirit possession: loud shouting, trance, and catalepsy, disconnected but also very elaborate speech, narrated experiences of supernatural encounters which trigger the exercise of the gift ...³

We note, that in both the ancient Welsh/British and Irish Celtic traditions male—and sometimes female (for there are many records of female *awenyddion*)—druids, bards, *ollams*, *filidh*, etc. apparently owed their poetic, prophetic, healing and magical powers to a powerful, wise and magically gifted female divine figure (e.g. a Cerridwen, Rhiannon, Bridget, etc.) who, at least in the available records associated with Cerridwen, tested novice *awenyddion* psycho-spiritually via grueling and vision-inspiring 'death-rebirth' experiences which, if survived, were fundamental to the novice eventually being acknowledged as a worthy servant of the tribe in specialist capacities.

At first glance then, Graves' Triple Goddess seems to be directing proceedings, however, the 'love mysticism' and 'Sacrificial King' elements emphasized by Graves in *T.W.G.* are far in the background here (or understood differently), and cathartic/mantic, spirit possession, vision questing, as well as symbolic death-rebirth experiences are, more to the fore. We also note that these experiences appear to be overseen by both fellow bards/*ollams/filidh* and the Muse Goddess herself (or 'Queen of the Bards') and her mentoring always has a community building purpose i.e. to develop wise and skilled poets, prophets, sages, healers, etc. capable of serving the community. The *awenyddion* possessed what we would these days describe as 'shamanic' knowledge and skills that had to be harnessed in order to protect, develop, serve, heal, inform/educate, etc. individuals and communities, as well as to maintain the general well-being of the land itself.

For our purposes, though Graves makes various mistakes in his interpretations of the roles of 'archaic poets' he sometimes comes very close to affirming ethical and socially progressive roles for poets, their human vessels and the Muse Goddess herself:

The poet was originally the *mystes*, or ecstatic devotee of the Muse; the women who took part in her rites were her representatives, like the nine dancers in the Cogul cave-painting, or the nine women who warmed the cauldron of Cerridwen with their breaths in Gwion's *Preiddeu Annwm*. Poetry in its archaic setting, in fact, was either the moral and religious law laid down for man by the nine-fold Muse, or the ecstatic utterance of man in furtherance of this law in glorification of the of the Muse.⁴

Although John and Caitlin Matthews deliberately operated on the borderlands between hard-nosed scholastic explorations of important aspects of ancient Celtic traditions and more speculative (even fictional) explorations, several of their works develop and re-imagine incomplete or enigmatic ancient textual sources in ways that are clearly cognizant of links between ancient Celtic cultural phenomena and modern anthropological and archaeological findings linked to other archaic Indigenous cultural traditions. John Matthews' re-imagining of the various elements of the *Romance of Taliesin* for a modern audience, for example, emphasizes 'shamanic' elements to not only the legend/myth itself, but also, by implication, to the initiation experiences, educational experiences, careers, etc. of *ollams*, *awenyddion*, bards, druids, etc.

³ Trans. Gwyneth Lewis and Rowan Williams, p. xxv, 'Introduction' to *The Book of Taliesin: Poems of Warfare and Praise in an Enchanted Britain*, Penguin paperback, 2020.

⁴ Robert Graves, *T.W.G.* p. 447.

operating in ancient British pagan traditions.⁵ In recreating a key scene from the Romance, i.e. Gwion's ineptitude in tending Cerridwen's cauldron properly, Matthews makes vivid elements of the transformative psycho-spiritual experience at the heart of the story. In so doing, he invites comparisons between ancient Celtic 'visionary' experiences and shamanic, mantic, etc. experiences documented globally in Animistic, Totemic and Polytheistic religious settings:

... and as I went to dampen it down, and came near the pot, several bubbles burst, and some drops—there may have been three—splashed onto my hand. ... They were scalding hot and I yelped with the pain and put my hand to my mouth to suck it. Immediately, the world turned around me and I fell into a dark roaring place where sound and sensation were too great to bear, and where I, Gwion, became lost—never to return. And what I saw there is what I must tell, for the drink was the drink of initiation, brewed for the Old One's [i.e. Cerridwen's] monstrous son; and in its black bile I tasted and saw all the sickness and all the waste of the world, and the long slow poison of the soul of mankind.... Sensations – Pain. Fear. Horror. Such fear as wraps one in cold like a mist: nebulous, nameless and unformed, but real as the pain of birth and dying. Pain dragged me down into a bottomless dark where meaning no longer held good and where the identity which made me Gwion left its existence behind.⁶

This is as far as we can take the ancient Celtic sources without stretching the facts well beyond the evidence. However, as we will see in the next section, similar initiatory experiences linked to 'primordial poets' are richly documented amongst traditional peoples in various parts of the world. However, these primordial poets experience things somewhat differently to Graves' interpretations, as outlined in *T.W.G.*, but not so differently that the central arguments of his book can be dismissed out of hand.

Part 2: Cathartic Vision Quests in Primordial Cultures and Ancient Mystery Cults

Words chanted or sung are powers in themselves, especially if they take the form of magic verses and are pronounced by the medicine man who imbues them with his own special powers.⁷

Let us turn now to the poet's experience of inspiration in other traditional cultures. We will refer primarily to works by Deren in relation to Haitian Voodoo traditions; Black Elk among the North American Indians; Levy-Bruhl among the Papuans; Strehlow and Elkin in relation to First Nations Australian traditions; and Ananda Coomaraswami on how creativity functions in Hindu cultures. As an overview, we will also consult Eliade's work, most often his book *Shamanism*, as well as Halifax's *Shamanic Voices*.⁸

⁵ In their joint work, *The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom* (Element Books, 1996, paperback version) Caitlin and John Matthews discuss their attempts to move ancient Irish and Welsh/British literary sources beyond the inevitable silences scholars encounter when working with incomplete texts from ancient traditions where the original contexts for the works are largely unclear. In the introduction to that book they state (p. 2): 'There is little doubt that early Celtic peoples had a predominantly shamanic culture. Their shamans were the inspired ones, the gifted people or *aes dana*, who could walk between the worlds with ease—the druids, poets and seers. [...] The shamanic skills of the professional *filidh* became gradually more formalised and less identifiably shamanic as time wore on, although the ancient shamanic skills were often passed down outside the professional classes by blood and ability.'

⁶ John Matthews, p.27-28 of *The Song of Taliesin: Stories and Poems from the Books of Broceliande*, The Aquarian Press, 1991.

⁷ Lucien Levy-Bruhl, pg 168, of *Primitive Mythology* (University of Queensland Press, 1983, New York).

⁸ Eliade, M. *Shamanism* (Arkana, 1989, London.); Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* (Pelican, 1980, London); Maya Deren, *The Divine Horseman* (Thames and Hudson, 1970, London); Levy-Bruhl, *ibid.*; A. K. Coomaraswami, *The Dance of Shiva* (Noonday Press, 1974, New York); Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe* (Penguin, 1973); A.P. Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (UQP, 1994, first edition 1976); and T. G.

What is clear is that the songs, poems, chants and dances performed by the poet-priests of various primordial traditions invariably serve as mediums for spirit beings, and carry magical or sacred energy due to their capacity to arouse powerful emotions. The poet-priest is seen as a mortal harmoniser of the visible with the invisible realms—the sacred world and the mundane or profane world. This role requires special training, ceremonies/rites, mentorship, shamanic curricula, etc.

According to Eliade, in his book *Shamanism*, common features of shamanic initiation experiences across numerous traditions are as follows:

...the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman's vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection. Viewed from this angle, any "sickness-vocation" fills the role of an initiation; for the sufferings that it brings on correspond to initiatory tortures, the psychic isolation of "the elected" is the counterpart to the isolation and ritual solitude of initiation ceremonies, and the imminence of death felt by the sick man (pain, unconsciousness, etc.) recalls the symbolic death represented in almost all initiation ceremonies.⁹

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

...these first ecstatic experiences always include one or more of the following themes: dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the internal organs and viscera; ascent to the sky and dialogue with the gods or spirits; descent to the underworld and conversations with spirits and the souls of dead shamans; various revelations both religious and shamanic ...¹⁰

Since the apprentice shamans are being initiated into a socially approved vocation it is obvious enough that the 'dismemberment', 'death', 'resurrection' etc. motifs they experience during initiation represent symbolic, rather than actual, physical experiences. Eliade is arguing that trainee shamans in many parts of the world undergo a radical re-ordering of their personalities in order to practice their profession efficiently. This re-ordering/reconstituting of the self involves ego-extinction/symbolic death and rebirth experiences that require shamans to journey to supernatural other worlds to gain knowledge, skills, etc.

Significant songs are gifted to poets and shamans by gods, ancestors, vegetation spirits, animal spirits and/or other spiritual entities. Interestingly, in many of these traditions female deities are of either central or of equal religious importance to that of male deities. Apart from the poet-shaman's role in harmonizing relations between humanity and the unseen realms—via prescribed ritualistic imperatives designed to protect the community—the poet also serves valuable cathartic, healing and 'Aversive' functions.¹¹ In such cultures poets are required to expertly manipulate sacralised emotional energy in order to lessen the dangers to individuals and the tribe of stored up

Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia* (Angus and Robertson, 1971, Sydney).

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, pg. 33. Arkana, 1989.

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 33.

¹¹ Often the ingestion of psychotropic substances quickens the artist/shaman's expansion of consciousness experiences. Such substances, of course, have been used in religious ceremonies around the world. David Solomon and George Andrews in *Drugs and Sexuality* explore the effects of various drugs on the poetic and sexual faculties. Invariably, in discussing primordial spiritual traditions the text emphasizes links between drugs and spirituality. Halifax's work, [op. cit.], also deals with various psychedelic drugs and their role in shamanic religious experiences. Certain types of mushrooms (pg. 129.); peyote (pg. 135); yaje (pg. 139); and the vine *banisteriopsis caapi* (pg. 140) are but some of the drugs discussed in relation to 'non-ordinary states of consciousness' (NOSCs). We note that Graves apparently experimented with certain Spanish mushrooms and other substances in the 1950s and 1960s and some of those experiments led to revisions of the earlier editions of *T.W.G.*.

toxic emotions (described as various types of malign spirit beings). The negative psycho-spiritual energies are deactivated, through rites featuring music, drama and poetry. The divine *mana* associated with the tribe's prime divinities or protective ancestors replaces malign emotions.¹²

Among the shamanic cultures documented by Halifax, the poet is isolated, immersed in—and forced to rely upon—the vastness and solitude of nature for a prescribed period of time as a prerequisite to receiving healing songs:

[Halifax writes] ... nature's wilderness is the locus for the elicitation of the individual's inner wilderness, 'the great plain in the spirit' and it is only here that the inner voices awaken into song.¹³

The specifics of these aspects to primordial initiation experiences are not made explicit in Graves' *T.W.G.* poetics, but rural living is consistently emphasized. In many traditions, however, prolonged closeness to the natural world activates emotions and non-ordinary states of consciousness of unusual intensity. Such experiences often help 'make' visionaries, mystics, poets and shamans, and are believed to gift to these people 'sacred tools' for assisting greater humanity:

The shaman learns to integrate the experience of sickness, suffering, dying and death, as well as to share the special knowledge of these powerful events with those who face death or disease for the first time.¹⁴

Novices, as well as more experienced shamans, often report vision quests to supernatural other realms that feature 'images, symbols, sensations of psycho-physical dismemberment, consistent with birth from the primordial womb,' as Halifax puts it.¹⁵ The process is often traumatic and specifically associated with the Archetypal Mother in a negatively polarised 'devouring' birth/rebirth role. Halifax's findings are thus more or less consistent with the findings documented in Eliade's book *Shamanism*.

The shaman's archetypal myth narrative brings us close to a key narrative beat of Graves' favoured life narrative for poets—i.e. the death and dismemberment of the 'Sacred King-Poet'. However, in primordial traditions, the process is most often initiatory and symbolic, and used to realign novice shamans with the more positive attributes (or 'polarities', Neumann) of a primordial female deities. It is, in short, at the heart of an experience of 'personality restructuring'. Put differently, nefarious female, animal and other spirits that block the novice's experience of life's numinous and expansive transpersonal possibilities are processed during the crisis or realignment process. As stated earlier, we are talking about a form of primordial 'ego-annihilation', aligned to a profound awareness of the spiritual and cosmic nature of death in all its guises, not just the actuality of physical death. Let us look at the specific role of poetry and music in shamanic experiences:

The shaman's spirit ascends, breaking the plane of death, soaring to a timeless place.

¹² To the African Kung people, the substance was termed *num*, pg. 55 of Halifax (ibid), 'an energy, or supernatural potency that paves the way for healing ... it resides in the belly ... it ascends or boils up the spinal chord'; to the Caribou Eskimos the substance was termed '*sila*', pg. 66 of Halifax. 'a power that can be invoked and applied.' To the Nth. American Paviotso people it was termed '*puha*' pg. 102 of Halifax. 'Curing depends on the manipulation of *puha*.' The Marind of Dutch New Guinea call it '*dema*', the Polynesians '*mana*', in central New Guinea it goes by the name of '*kugi*' (see Levy-Bruhl Ch. 1. Ibid.). All these concepts point to the interpenetration of the material world by sacred energies given to mankind by tribal ancestors. The physiological and emotional underpinnings to the concept are manifold.

¹³ Op cit.. Halifax, pg. 6 'The Wilderness of Solitude.'

¹⁴ *ibid*, Halifax, pg. 5. 'The Crisis Journey.'

¹⁵ *ibid*. Halifax, pg. 5.

The winglike rhythms of the drum and the dance and the pitch of the song transport the ecstatic's spirit to a realm far beyond the ordinary.¹⁶

Music, according to Halifax's research, helps transport the shaman to 'the timeless present' spoken of by Joseph Campbell and Charles Muses in their discussion of Goddess traditions published just before Campbell's death.¹⁷ In his chapter/essay 'The Ageless Way of the Goddess', Muses specifically aligns ancient Goddess traditions in Egypt, China and elsewhere with shamanic teachings, before stating that ours is an age of spiritual emergency that demands we undertake a 'supershamanic enterprise'.¹⁸

The goal in American native traditions also seems to have been that of balancing and harmonising human spiritual energies with natural and divine energies, as well as with the spirits of the dead. Emotional growth and healing thus required a kind of shamanic 'return to origins'—i.e. a place out of time where the manifest past still exists in some form influencing, as it were by invisible tendrils, the present.¹⁹ Returning to the visionary chaos of our spiritual origins and manipulating sacred symbols in prescribed traditional ways give the poet-shaman unique powers of healing:

The shaman is a healed healer who has retrieved the broken pieces of his or her body and psyche, and through a personal rite of transformation has integrated many phases of life experience.²⁰

This healed healer carries the medicine of the gods and ancestors not simply through intellectual knowledge, such as we see in modern psychology, but through an inner calm and sense of *mana* or balance. Donald Sandner's work details the various key stages or story beats linked to transformation myths and rites overseen by tribal shamans. The Gila Monster story is particularly interesting since at its heart is the familiar shamanic initiation story identified by Eliade—in *Shamanism*—which features the dismemberment, death, and rebirth of an apprentice shaman/healer who later becomes skilled in memorizing numerous tribal healing songs, chants and rites.²¹

In *The Sacred Pipe*, by Black Elk, we also read of Lakota shamans, as well as ordinary people, increasing their spiritual *mana* by participating in sacred rites of purification involving fasting, washing, drug ingestion, isolation, sweat lodges and ritualistic chanting. Often the reward for enduring such experiences is a song, a charm, a remedy, or a wise insight to be shared with the tribe. The cathartic element to these experiences is indicated by the Indian word used, which translates as 'lamentation'.²²

The link between music, poetry, dramatic performances/rites and shamanic practices of ancient pedigree is also evident in the iconic Four Corners/American Southwest figure of Kokopelli, the flute-playing shaman—though, most likely, the name Kokopelli is a later development:

... there are certain conventions in the rock art symbolism of Archaic and early Ancestral Puebloan people that may relate to shamanistic themes, and these could have been recognized as such by everyone from those cultures. [...] [In South-West traditions] the shaman was a priest-healer who was believed to possess supernatural

¹⁶ *ibid.* pg. 16. 'The Spirit Flight.'

¹⁷ Joseph Campbell and Charles Muses (Eds.), *In All Her Names*, Harper Collins, San Francisco.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 153. Chapter 4: 'The Ageless Way of Goddess'.

¹⁹ See Joseph Bruchac's *The Native American Sweat Lodge* (The Crossing Press, 1993). Also M. Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949) and *The Sacred and The Profane* (London, 1986)

²⁰ Halifax, *op. cit.* pg. 18. 'Shamanic Balance.'

²¹ See Donald Sandner, *Navaho Symbols of Healing*, pp. 158-160. More generally Chapters 2. 'Guardians of the Symbol', 7. The Ritual Control of Evil, 8. 'Death and Rebirth: Process of Renewal' and 9. Mandalas of Healing and the Pollen Path' are highly relevant here. (H.B.J. Books, 1979, New York).

²² Black Elk, *op. cit.* pp. 46-66, 'Crying For a Vision.'

or psychic powers received through trances and dreams. He was responsible for healing the sick, revealing the arcane, and using his powers to control events that affected the fertility of crops, of game animals and of the tribe itself.²³

Slifer establishes links between Trickster-Shaman deities of various tribes, human shaman-healers and ancient rock art featuring scenes related to a humpbacked flute player: 'As trickster, the flue player shares traits with many characters from other Native American regions.'²⁴

The various Shaker Cults assembled by North American First Nations People after European colonization are also informative for our purposes (see: *Magic and the Millennium*). Social trauma—i.e. invasion—precipitated desperate religious responses of a cathartic nature—extreme forms of spiritual catharsis designed to rid survivors of various internalised toxic emotions. Consistent with ancient tribal traditions emotions like extreme fear/terror, loss, sadness, rage, hurt, helplessness and so on, were seen as spirits of evil attacking the souls of individuals.²⁵ The 'trembling' rituals were designed to rid the body of such toxic emotions (evil spirits).²⁶

Strehlow in analyzing Arandan (i.e. an Indigenous Australian tribe) sacred songs and dances writes:

If the native singers, as I believe, found a strong emotional release from their own tensions when singing these songs, then their poetry can be said to have had considerable social value for them as well ... Bywater says 'tragic excitement serves as a sort of medicine, producing a catharsis (i.e. purging) to lighten and relieve the soul.'²⁷

Elkin, on the other hand, has much of a more general nature to say about Australian First Nations initiation, medicine man initiation and personal healing ceremonies. In speaking of the way 'doctors/Men of High Degree' are selected and made/initiated in various indigenous Australian tribes, Elkin states:

The medicine man ... possesses [great power] and other faculties in a developed degree, the result of being gifted, of having passed through an experience of making, which gave him power and confidence, and of specializing and training. Moreover, he was first of all, a fully initiated member of the tribe, disciplined by preparation for custodianship of tribal mysteries and indoctrinated with a respect for tribal sanctions and norms of life.²⁸

We are thus in the same cultural realms as those described by Eliade, in *Shamanism*, and, indeed, Elkin's descriptions of how Australian medicine men are made tallies with many of the motifs and 'story beats' detailed by Eliade as common features of 'shamanic'

²³ Dennis Slifer, *Kokopelli: The Magic, Mirth, and Mischief of an Ancient Symbol*, p. 101 (Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2007).

²⁴ Dennis Slifer, *Kokopelli: The Magic, Mirth, and Mischief of an Ancient Symbol*, p. 106.

²⁵ Horror, lust/arousal, madness, fits of melancholia, laughing and hallucinatory obsessions, etc., are all aspects of what Eliade terms the '*mysterium tremendum*' or the 'immanence of the real' - as against the pseudo-real. They are the beginnings of the 'White Darkness' as Deren terms the thinning of consciousness brought on by priests, musicians, and divinities in ceremonies attached to the Voodoo cults of Haiti.

²⁶ Bryan Wilson. *Magic and the Millennium* [Paladin, 1975, Herts.] pp. 357-364. 'Syncretism of Shamanism and Shaking.' They [the priests] might rub the body and when inspiration occurred grasp the afflicted part to extract the evil from it.'

²⁷ Strehlow, op. cit. p. 681, and p. 380.

²⁸ A.P. Ekin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree: Initiation and Sorcery in the World's Oldest Tradition*, p. 14 (Inner Traditions International, and UQP, 1994 and 1977).

initiation in many primordial cultures. In particular, the motifs of 1. 'symbolic death'/'rending to pieces' 2. Symbolic operations on the novice's 'corpse' involving new organs, etc. worthy of a medicine man; 3. a visit, whilst 'dead', to the otherworld/spirit world/mythic past to acquire wisdom/songs/magical powers, etc. and finally, 4. a resurrection/rebirth experience into a new form—i.e. the form of a powerful medicine man/doctor—seems to be an almost continent-wide experience associated with the Australian indigenous equivalent of shamanic initiation.

1. The postulant, who, of course, has been approved and accepted as a candidate, is killed [...] ... in the southwestern part of this large region [South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and far west Queensland] death comes through being swallowed by a great, mythical water snake, which, like the rainbow, can reach the sky. The killing and swallowing are interpreted as a death by the doctors and by the members of the postulant's group. [...] 2. Operations are performed on the ritual 'corpse'... Magical additions are made to the insides, head, thigh bones, and ankles and other joints. [...] 3. Finally, the 'dead person' is restored to life [...] 4. During the making and afterward, the postulant is brought into contact with spirits and heroes of totemic significance, the spirits of the dead.²⁹

Needless to say, music, chanting, story-telling, body-painting, etc.—i.e. the creative arts—also play a central part in many of these 'making rites' related to the initiation of Indigenous clever men/medicine men/shamans.

Clearly, in many primordial traditions the ancestor spirits, gods etc. act through the tribe's sacred poets and shamans to keep human relationships healthy; to see children safely into the world; to create affection (via 'love magic'); to maintain affection between couples; to neutralize the impacts of stressful life changes and traumas; to keep the community in balance with the animal and vegetable kingdoms; and, periodically, to purge and purify toxic emotions from individuals, and so on.

We might profitably ask: where exactly do songs, charms, incantations, stories, dances etc. come from? One answer is ...

a mythological world that existed before the primordial divisions emerged, destroying an harmonious and divine past.³⁰

As sacralised sequences of words, melodies and rhythms, sacred songs functioned in traditional societies to mend real world *versus* sacred world divisions:

Song stands at the intimate centre of the cosmos of the individual.... At that moment when the shaman song emerges, when the sacred breath rises up from the depths of the heart, the centre is found and the source of all that is divine is tapped.³¹

An Eskimo shamaness described the moment of inspiration as follows:

Our forefathers believed that the songs were born in stillness while all endeavoured to think beautiful thoughts. Then they take shape in the minds of men and rise up like bubbles from the depths of the sea ... this is how sacred songs are made.³²

²⁹ Ibid, A.P. Ekin, p. 25-26.

³⁰ Halifax, op. cit. 'Shaman Song' pg. 29-33.

³¹ ibid. pg. 28-33.

³² ibid. pg. 30 (an Alaskan Shamaness).

This is surely one of the most beautiful and haunting descriptions imaginable of poetry's gentle emergence in our human world. Here is another description, also quoted in Halifax, concerning the inspirational experience—one that aligns creativity with the processes of psycho-spiritual struggle we've been discussing. In this case, a period of intense inner struggle precedes the emergence of a song:

The pain of the body and the loneliness of the soul can decay the husk protecting the song within the singer. At that moment when the shaman is most profoundly enmeshed in the experience of suffering or joy, at that moment of ecstasy when he or she is transported to a place that is beyond mortality, the poetry breaks forth to overwhelm, a potent and aesthetic resolution. This is an emotion-filled process, occurring in the realm of the spirit.³³

The cosmic, involuntary, nature of primordial poetic experiences is emphasised by the following description of the arrival of a poem song (as related to Halifax by a Gitksan Indian shaman):

A chant was coming out of me without my being able to do anything to stop it ... the songs force themselves out complete without any attempt to compose them.³⁴

Here the non-rational, possessed aspect of poetic inspiration is evident—intuitive, subconscious aspects of the mind seem to seize consciousness in order for the voice of the divine to speak through its human vessel.

Orpingalik, on the other hand, allies songs and chants with the everyday joys and sorrows of life—to him, to sing is the very essence of being human.

There are so many occasions in one's life where a joy or sorrow is felt in such a way that the desire comes to sing ... all my being is song. I sing as I draw breath.³⁵

A. K. Coomaraswami, too discusses the unity between music, poetry, dance and religion in Indian culture in his work *The Dance of Shiva*.³⁶ In Hindu culture, he writes, 'The Indian singer is a poet, and the poet is a singer.' He argues that musicians are invariably 'pupils of the gods', and that they gain their skills from 'visiting the heaven world.' He also suggests that 'Indian music is not art but life itself, for it is the inner reality of things.'³⁷ The emotional power attributed to sacralised music is implicit in the Indian word for a musical theme, 'raga' meaning 'colouring' or 'passion'.³⁸

The emotions conjured by a god or goddess inspired musician of the Hindu faith are seen as sacralised—specifically, sacralised moods or patterns of inspirational feeling.. Coomaraswami also argues that the sacralised Hindu poet-singer-priest is skilled in emotional cleansing by way of delivering intense poetic experiences to audiences: 'This is the *Katharsis* of the Greeks', he writes.³⁹

Sarasvati, the goddess of speech, writing and learning, and Narada, the god of occult learning, act alongside Krishna, in his role as flute player, to inspire Indian poets and musicians. Sarasvati, in particular, is directly relevant to the themes of *T.W.G.* since in her, we again glimpse an ancient female wisdom deity quite different in her domains of manifestation to other Hindu female deities. Her domains—like those of Seshat in Egypt,

³³ *ibid.* pg. 30.

³⁴ *ibid.* pg. 33. (Isaac Tens, Gitksan Indian.)

³⁵ *ibid.* pg. 32. (Orpingalik)

³⁶ A. K. Coomaraswami, *The Dance of Shiva*, pgs. 85-97 [Noonday Press].

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 95.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pgs. 88-89.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pgs. 85-97.

Bridget and Cerridwen in ancient Celtic pagan traditions, and Athena and Minerva in ancient Greek and Roman traditions—involved highly constructive knowledge and skills domains. She presided over musical, poetic, artistic, etc. inspiration as well as education/learning; healing (especially forms of psychological healing) and so on. In short, Sarasvati is an ancient wisdom Goddess presiding over a range of creative and educational pursuits.⁴⁰

We could go on listing examples from any number of animistic, totemic and polytheistic cultures from around the world. French anthropologist, Levy-Bruhl, for example, despite his scholastic faults, succeeded in drawing attention to the different ways of experiencing and thinking about the world evident in peoples from non-Western and non-Monotheistic cultures. Among the Taulipay Indians, for example, he found that many sicknesses and illnesses were associated with specific supernatural entities. Consequently, cures involved the use of poetic charms, dances and songs designed to transfer the *mana* of more positive divinities or spirits to the sick person.⁴¹

Among the Dayaks of Borneo, he observed that sorcerers are believed to manipulate toxic emotions as a means to harm, often from a distance, their intended victims. Indeed, in many primordial traditions, curses are constructed and activated by directing strong toxic emotions into word sequences, which are then performed/incanted. To the Dayaks, mythic creatures also cause stomach upsets: 'they creep into the victim's body and cause him to suffer a fearful and unrelieved stomach-ache until in the end he dies.'⁴² Although, in this example, a physiological illness is being personified by members of the tribe, the same principle exists with regard to psycho-spiritual illnesses.

The poet-priest functions, then, to rid the tribe of negative emotions/spiritual energies, and the origins of poetry are probably linked—as Graves argues in *T.W.G.*—to ancient oral collections of charms, curses and invocations.

As a good example of how the sorcerer-poet manipulates symbols and objects containing sacred *mana*, readers are encouraged to read Victor Turner's classic text, *The Drums of Affliction*.⁴³ In that work, and others by Turner, many of the elements listed in our discussion so far are present; for example, the sorcerer diagnoses social and personal discord as a spirit of discord. The cure is a form of emotional exorcism involving powerful *abreactive* and symbolic elements. Negative emotions transcending the immediate situation are unveiled over a period of days and eventually expressed violently (but safely). Positive emotional energies, i.e. forms of communal and personal peace, then take the place of the 'bad spirits'. The ceremonies involved call on the help of various archetypal spirit beings, and 'origin' myth-dramas linked to the spirit beings are sometimes performed.

Conclusion

Our analysis in this section reveals the extraordinary role of inspiration, song and poetry in many and varied traditional cultures. Although much of the material we have covered is synonymous with the general spirit of Graves' *T.W.G.*, indigenous peoples clearly place a greater emphasis on creative activities that further medicinal/healing, personal growth and cathartic goals.

⁴⁰ One of the most interesting books on Sarasvati's role in Balinese Hindu culture is by Ron Jenkins (for A.R.M.A.) entitled *Saraswati in Bali: a Temple, a Museum and a Mask*, published by A.R.M.A., 2014, Ubud.

⁴¹ Levy-Bruhl, Ch.5. 'Imitation - Participation.' op. cit.

⁴² Levy-Bruhl, op. cit. pg. 232.

⁴³ Victor Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes Among the Ndembu of Zambia*, especially the section 'Some Features of Ndembu Religion' (Routledge, 2018, first published 1968 by OUP).

We also note that before sorcerer-poets can be trusted to carry out rituals of healing (or Aversion, etc.) they must themselves have experienced certain visionary revelations transmitted via spirit assistants resident in the mythopoetic realms. A state of psycho-spiritual crisis/ego-annihilation often triggers the call to become a healer, priest, shaman or sorcerer. During the apprentice poet/shaman's 'initiation' crisis, certain songs of healing—i.e. medicine songs—may be gifted to the novice via personal spirits, gods, animal spirits or ancestors. Collectively, such songs may come to represent a significant part of each tribe's sacred medicine. The poet-shaman is also, very often, seen as a once wounded, now healed, healer and wise person.⁴⁴

We also note that in many primordial cultures music, chants/poetry, art and dance are central to both ritual initiation and healing experiences, as well as to the conjuring of the divinities and spirits necessary to get things done in the human world.⁴⁵

Part 3: Creativity in Modern Transpersonal, Jungian, Psychedelic and Bioenergetic Transformative Psychologies

So far in this chapter we've looked at possible shamanic remnants evident in ancient Welsh/British and Irish pagan Celtic traditions. We've also discussed texts by anthropologists and other commentators concerning living animistic, totemic and polytheistic traditions that feature cathartic, exorcistic and Aversive rites, as well as other elements long associated with authentic primordial poetic narratives that are quite different to the narrative made central to *T.W.G.* (in particular, the globally archetypal 'shamanic initiation' narrative). Some questions, however, emerge out of the short summaries to the two sections above. Was Graves, in fact, well aware of ancient shamanic narratives and their key elements? If so, did he choose to de-emphasise certain ancient elements and over-emphasise (or even invent) elements closer to his own sensitivities—perhaps aspects he felt more relevant to poets living in modern secular societies facing Nuclear Age challenges? There is also, of course, the possibility that Graves' agenda all along was to present to the world his own unique poetic—a poetic he no doubt understood as a revelation gifted to him by the Triple Goddess herself. On this reading, ancient and anthropological evidence supporting Graves' theory becomes largely irrelevant.

I've come across no evidence to suggest that his unique interpretations of ancient creativity traditions (for inclusion in *T.W.G.*) were deliberately unscientific. Instead, I would simply point out that many of the key works discussed so far in this section—works written in the midst of global post-colonial political and cultural developments, as well as in the midst of advances in Celtic studies—were unknown to Graves as he set about writing the early editions of *T.W.G.*. For better or worse, the book ended up overly-dependent upon the works of Frazer, Harrison, Bachofen, and Murray, as well as the theories of a bevy of 19th Century Celtic Revival writers. As discussed earlier, their errors and silences were imported into *T.W.G.* and, for whatever reason, Graves chose not to update the book's anthropological foundations as new, more accurate, perspectives became available in the second half of the twentieth century.

For our purposes, we will end the theory part of this study by suggesting that if

⁴⁴ Halifax [op. cit.] uses the term 'wounded healer' quite often in describing the various crises experienced by those who become shamans.

⁴⁵ In many such cultures, musical instruments are sacred and the musician's personal helping spirits imbue the instruments with divine *mana*. This positive energy is, in turn, activated during performances. Instruments and musicians are sometimes understood to be possessed by gods, goddesses or ancestor spirits—especially during live performances. In some African tribal cultures, sacralised instruments are believed to be, quite literally, the voices of ancestors, spirits or gods. The instruments in question seem to be tuned to the unique cadences, grammar structures and rhythms of tribal languages—the instruments thus seem to talk and sing.

Graves did deliberately ignore alternative primordial poet-shaman narratives, perhaps because he thought them too archaic for modern poets and creatives to work with, such a perspective needs to be urgently reassessed. I will close this section by briefly discussing several modern psychological systems that view primordial shamanic, etc. traditions positively. These same systems are also positive toward the role of the arts in healthy societies.⁴⁶

Transpersonal psychology (especially the psychology of Stan Grof) and Jungian/Analytical Psychology are two modern schools of psychology and psychotherapy specifically acknowledging links to ancient shamanic, mythological and mystery traditions. What is more, both of these 'depth psychology' modalities emphasise experiences involving archetypal entities/energies resident in the deep psyche whilst also focusing on transformative therapeutic experiences for patients (and, implicitly, for therapists) that are synonymous with experiences enacted in ancient shamanic, mystical, alchemical, etc. traditions. These modalities also make use of various artistic disciplines as a means to facilitate psycho-spiritual breakthroughs of one form or another. Consequently, modern poets and creatives willing to confront the sometimes challenging material emerging from the Personal or/and Collective Unconscious, the Perinatal Birth Matrices and, more generally, the Transpersonal realms via these therapies, may well find themselves undergoing initiation, healing and personal growth experiences similar to those experienced by the 'primordial poet-shamans' of myriad traditions. They may also find themselves inspired creatively.

Stanislov Groff, after experimenting with the therapeutic uses of L.S.D. in the 1960s, found that many experiences reported by patients mirrored ancient descriptions of 'archaic substrata' to the psyche found in the shamanic and mystical literatures. He also felt that Jung's theories concerning a collective unconscious (sitting alongside the Personal—or biographical—Unconscious) as well as Jung's descriptions of transpersonal/spiritual dimensions to the psyche, were ultimately more useful than Freud's more limited theorising. Groff's Breathwork and L.S.D. treatment patients typically act out intense experiences involving almost unbearable physical and emotional pain (from remnant traumas), ego-death, and eventual rebirth. There are many similarities between these experiences and experiences reported by the shamans, etc. discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. Interestingly, some of the reported 'rending' experiences involved a kind of attack by a feminine divinity—Kali, Lilith, Cerridwen or a witch (though attacks by masculine monsters and animals were also reported). For many of Groff's patients experiences that contained intense symbolic experiences also, typically, involved re-enactments of medically documented trauma incidents linked to their own birth experiences, to childhood abuse or to surgery/body trauma experiences, etc..⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Although my including this patently 'psychological' material may seem irrelevant to a study of a book explicitly about the primordial roots of authentic poetry, i.e. *T.W.G.*, I would only point out that in many primordial poetic/creative traditions poets are priests/esses, medicine men and women, exorcists, shamans, etc. and that in a number of the traditions we've discussed, Muse Goddess figures oversee a cluster of activities that we no longer link to poets in our modern world. Bridget and Cerridwen in pagan Irish and Welsh/British traditions, oversaw healing and alchemy/metal-work, as well as poetry and bardic knowledge. Saraswati (in Hinduism) and Seshat (in Ancient Egyptian religion) were deities of all forms of writing, as well as of libraries, but they also oversaw education and the accumulation of scientific and medical knowledge, among other functions. Athena and Hecate (in the Ancient Greek tradition) and Minerva (in the Ancient Roman tradition) although inspirational to writers, poets and communicators of all descriptions also oversaw other crafts and disciplines. The 'specialized poet' watched over by an equally specialized deity was rarely seen in ancient cultures.

⁴⁷ Groff, *Realms of the Human Unconscious* especially Ch.4 'Perinatal Experiences in LSD sessions.' [Condor Books, 1975, New York.]

Strong *abreactive*/cathartic elements to these therapeutic re-enactments assisted patients to realign their adult selves with more healthy primordial archetypes (e.g. the Nurturing Mother, the Nurturing Father, etc.). The psycho-spiritual ejection of suppressed toxic emotions also permitted Groff's patients to (re)perceive the natural world as 'numinous'—that is 'immanent with soul/connectedness/spirituality'. The patients also became, effectively, 'twice born'.

Groff describes quite eloquently the experiences of ego-death reported by his patients undergoing both Breathwork and L.S.D. treatments. Mythopoetic dimensions to the deep unconscious are often activated during therapy processes:

A frequent symbol of ego death is the experience of the victim sacrificed to the Aztec sun god Huitzilopochtli; here the individual feels that his body is being opened by an obsidian knife and his living heart torn out of his body by the high priest. The death-rebirth sequence is often symbolised by identification with specific deities, such as the Pre-Columbian god Quetzalcoatl appearing in the form of a plumed serpent, or the Egyptian god Osiris, killed and dismembered by his evil brother Set, and re-assembled by his wife and sister, Isis. Occasionally, other deities symbolizing death and resurrection—among them Dionysus, Orpheus, Persephone, and Adonis—appear in a similar context. Probably the most common symbolic framework for this experience is Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection, the mystery of Good Friday and the unveiling of the Holy Grail.⁴⁸

The sense of spiritual awakening and well-being resulting from such painful, even terrifying, death-rebirth experiences recalls documented outcomes linked to various shamanic cathartic rites—and music and art are often used in Breathwork sessions to assist patients to activate and process buried material.

Jung's entire psychology revolves around the need for the gradual emergence of the 'Self Archetype'. During this process, patients typically wrestle with other key archetypes, many of which can be linked to key life-span experiences. Traumatic childhood experiences generate 'complexes' that skew certain archetypes in the collective unconscious toward negative polarities. Other archetypes, of a more negative nature, are activated by real world experiences—e.g. The Shadow Archetype and the Persona Archetype.

Although Jung's model of the psyche certainly contained Freudian elements, it also incorporated ancient alchemical, Hermetic, Orphic and mythological elements. Jung saw Analytic therapy as replicating, essentially, alchemical (spiritual alchemy) and ancient Greek mystery cult processes. Patients moved gradually from an unconscious state (the *massa confusa* state of alchemy) through several stages of flowering—represented by colours i.e. *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubido*—to a final 'golden' stage named variously 'the Child of the Philosophers', the 'Stone' or 'Elixir of the Philosophers' or 'the Divine Hermaphrodite', i.e. the stage in which the Self Archetype is fully manifest and engaged with the world at large, and the Individuation process is all-but complete. The various, seemingly interminable, transformations of metals, gases, fluids, vegetables, etc. in the alembic—so beloved of Early Modern alchemists, e.g. calcination, circulation, deflagration, exantlation, sublimation, etc.—symbolized, for Jung, psycho-spiritual conflicts within the psyche between the Ego/Persona; the Personal Unconscious; and the activated Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious. Neumann also wrote about the struggles at the heart of Analytic therapies when he wrote about 'the constellation of archetypes'. Like Jung, he outlines the components of an emotional and spiritual crisis (sometimes also with physical dimensions) in which the organism is seized by the 'real',

⁴⁸ Groff, op. cit. pg. 142.

thus leading, theoretically, to a kind of purgation or cleansing of destructive passions.⁴⁹

Much of the language of the ancient, Medieval and Early Modern alchemists suggests a series of psycho-spiritual rending processes (i.e. mini 'ego deaths') that lead to psycho-spiritual flowerings that offer greater wisdom, empathy and virtue. Interestingly, 'love mysticism' is also part of the symbology of spiritual alchemy, since symbols concerning the ups and downs of love relationships, as well as sexual activities, are routinely depicted in many alchemical woodcuts, book diagrams, formulae, etc. This fact might lend succor to Graves' thesis in *T.W.G.* that the trials and tribulations of love relationships between Muse and poet may, indeed, provide forward impetus for processes of creative and self-transformation. Interestingly, Jung—whom Graves critiqued savagely on mythological grounds—wrote three full length books on the links between alchemy and Analytic psychology.⁵⁰ We note that Graves critiqued both Yeats and Jung for their interest in alchemy. In mocking a passage by the German alchemist Rugerus, Graves wrote: 'What tersity, what tensity, what eloquence—what hard, burnished rubbish!'⁵¹

Also of interest in the Jungian system is the centrality of the concept of 'synchronicity', as well Jung's general understanding of occult phenomena. Such phenomena, according to Jung, can be unleashed during the transformative experiences associated with therapy. Graves' ideas about 'proleptic' and 'analeptic' thought, curses and enchantments, and magic parallel Jung's thinking on some topics. To Jung the unconscious contains a reservoir, not only of memories, archetypes and complexes, but also of transpersonal phenomena outlawed by classical scientists.

Ehrenzweig also provides a modern psychoanalytic interpretation of the artist's crisis of consciousness.⁵² Ultimately, he comes close to acknowledging certain 'original' archetypal powers of healing that stand outside time, as it were, but act constantly on the human organism via emotional energies. Ehrenzweig's language is scientific; however, his conclusions are interesting given the themes of this chapter.

In describing the artist's personal crisis, he posits first a psychotic stage for the artist poet—here we note similarities to Graves' idea that a Romantic rebuff given by the Muse/beloved to a poet can precipitate a kind of emotional crisis. According to Ehrenzweig, this stage may see buried traumas and complexes rise to envelop consciousness. In terms of the theory advanced by Graves in *T.W.G.* we are perhaps talking about an initiatory Cerridwen-type figure—the White Goddess proper.

Then follows, according to Ehrenzweig, the 'manic-oceanic' phase where 'creative man prepares as it were in his work a receiving *womb*, the image of a *benevolent mother figure* to contain and integrate the fragmented material.'⁵³

Ehrenzweig names this benevolent figure 'the manic womb of rebirth'.⁵⁴ She is the mother (and perhaps, further along the lifespan, the Lover) that the child/artist perhaps never experienced but wishes to experience. This 'benevolent' mother is similar, we note, to Graves' figure of the Black Goddess, as depicted in his essay of the same name.

It goes without saying that Ehrenzweig has translated into psychoanalytic terminology ancient initiatory (for artists) 'rending/dismemberment' and 'rebirth' experiences millennia old and of world-wide provenance.

⁴⁹ Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*, pg. 4. (Bollingen and Princeton University Press, 1983, first published 1963) Starting 'A state of biopsychical seizure ...'

⁵⁰ See: C.J. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Vol. 14 of the Collected Works of C.J. Jung); *Psychology and Alchemy* (Vol. 12 of The Collected Works of C.J. Jung) and *Alchemical Studies* (Vol. 13 of The Collected Works of C.J. Jung).

⁵¹ Robert Graves, p. 139, 'These Be Your Gods, O Israel!' in *The Crowning Privilege* (Pelican, 1959).

⁵² Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, pgs. 135-41. [Paladin, 1970. London]

⁵³ *ibid.* pg. 204.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pgs. 135-37.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to be more specific in this chapter about what might actually be going on during the initiatory ‘vision quest’ experiences of primordial poets, shamans, artists, musicians, etc.. Do their experiences activate and perhaps cleanse—through catharsis and insight—repressed negative psychic and spiritual energies linked to a build up of traumatic life experiences?

It is likely, in the face of modern evidence, that Graves’ favoured ‘rending to pieces’ narrative—i.e. at the hands of the Muse Goddess—is largely a symbolic experience long associated with various types of life-span ‘transition’ experiences, e.g. a) boyhood-to-manhood initiation experiences; b) shamanic initiation experiences related to the gaining of mystical powers of song, wisdom, healing, prophecy, spirit invocation, etc. as well as vision quest experiences; c) ‘rebirth’ rites involving initiation into mystery cults that, through ritual, reveal to initiates sacred knowledge; and d) various rites marking changes to plants and animals across their lifespans and across the year that were important to human communities (e.g. for the purposes of planting, harvesting, etc.); and so on. Such largely symbolic (rather than physical/actual) rending experiences, observations and rites are common in many animistic, totemic and polytheistic cultures and Graves’ decision to interpret the ‘rending to pieces’ experience more narrowly in terms of a supposedly universal myth narrative emphasizing actual death and ‘love/sex mysticism’, (as well as, specifically, the rejection of the poet by the Muse Goddess) is somewhat puzzling.⁵⁵

Important later 20th century works on shamanic vision quests, possession and catharsis in primordial traditions invite us to conclude that Graves misunderstood important aspects of the roles ascribed to poets, shamans, etc. in actual primordial traditions. He also misunderstood the role of rites and practices featuring catharsis, as well as their goals of gifting to individuals the sense of being spiritually reborn into better versions of themselves.

The shamanic crisis experiences (cathartic, in essence) researched by Halifax, Eliade, Middleton, Levi-Strauss, Deren and Lewis often led to positive personal outcomes for shamans, poet-priests, etc. since through them people attained healing, as well as creative, magical and premonitory powers seen as useful to the societies in which they lived.⁵⁶ The process was often accompanied by the release of ‘toxic emotions’ (understood in terms of ‘evil spirits’). The poet undergoing such experiences was then—like Dionysus and Orpheus in the ancient Greek tradition, like Gwion/Taliesin in the ancient Welsh tradition, like shamans the world over—in a sense ‘twice born.’ Firstly as a mortal, secondly as a poet/artist or shaman. A major primordial poetic purpose, then, was to undergo a psycho-spiritual initiation process—or series of processes across a career/life. The reward for enduring these sometimes harrowing rites, was the acquisition of greater clarity of thought, new stores of empathy, new depths of spiritual and magical understanding and learnedness, as well as new works of art.

Although Graves was critical of neo-psychoanalytic schools of psychology—especially Jungian psychology—some of these approaches are quite positive toward the

⁵⁵ As an example: “For the poet there is no other woman but Cerridwen and he desires one thing above all else in the world: her love. As Blodeuwedd, she will gladly give him her love but at one price: his life. She will exact payment punctually and bloodily.” Graves, pg.447. *T.W.G.*

⁵⁶ L. M. Lewis in *Ecstatic Religions* examines the relative mental health or otherwise of various shamans in traditional cultures. A sense of puzzlement is expressed in the text, since though the shamans sometimes display (apparently) schizophrenic behaviors, these behaviours are neither permanent nor seen as socially nefarious. On the contrary they are valued. Lewis grudgingly admits that the shamans are in many ways less neurotic than their fellow tribespeople. Plato’s pronouncements that emotional excess indicates spiritual sickness is apparently still influencing modern psychiatry! See Ch. 7. pp. 178-206. ‘Possession and Psychiatry.’

arts. Jungians, for example, routinely use creative pursuits to move patients through psychological blocks and complexes. Grof's transpersonal-psychodynamic approach also values the arts, and vivid mythological sequences and symbols from many of the world's spiritual traditions often surface during therapy sessions. Other Transpersonal and psychodynamic therapies also make use of story-telling, poetry, music, art, dance, nonfiction biographical writing, etc. to deepen the impact of the therapeutic process.

I have not argued in this chapter for the complete dismissal of Graves' arguments about the transformative and creative possibilities of certain types of love relationships. There is no doubt that for poets, in particular for love poets, 'Muse experiences' often involve emotional and psychosexual components intense enough to initiate something like the ancient death/catharsis/rebirth sequence we've discussed in this chapter. The evidence of Western sexual mysticism, e.g. the central motifs and story sequences of spiritual alchemy, also suggest that Graves', essentially, 'psychosexual poetics' (as presented in *T. W. G.*), has some merit and historical backing.

However, myth narratives (and accompanying story beats) linked to the shamanic initiation practices of many primordial cultures offer poets (and here I include female poets and third gender poets) alternative inspirational options that are just as primordially 'authentic' as Graves' chosen myth narrative. I have also argued that emotional catharsis, understood as a form of 'rending to pieces' of ordinary consciousness (and in its expanded form, i.e. operating beyond the narrow constraints of romantic love emotions/experiences), is an ancient element in the creation of 'authentic' forms of poetry and art. In addition, many ancient poets were skilled at invoking representing, resolving, etc. a much larger range of emotions than the limited number showcased in *T.W.G.*.

At times Graves did edge toward metaphors of personal growth for poets and other creatives, when he implied that for a poet the departure of the Triple Goddess from a Muse-possessed woman might be experienced as a kind of painful, even sacrificial, near death experience. At times, he also implies that the poet must endure this experience, process it creatively, learn from it and then, eventually, move on cheerfully—awaiting the 'next bright bolt'. There is in these insights the suggestion of a path toward personal growth. We also note that Graves' own death and resurrection experience during WWI—where he was initially pronounced and reported dead after being hit with shrapnel—may have contributed to others intuitively viewing him as a kind of modern shaman.

For our purposes, we will conclude by stating that although the Triple Goddess and other deities, do indeed promise to each of us a final 'rending to pieces' experience, i.e. our actual deaths, there are many other experiences open to modern poets and creatives seeking inspiration and personal growth that more accurately resemble positive 'mini-deaths'—i.e. experiences involving growth and letting go of outdated aspects of the 'self'. Some ancient mystical and shamanic traditions, as well as some modern psychological systems, assist individuals to negotiate difficult personal growth experiences. In many of these traditions and systems the arts—music, dance, story, drama, art, etc.—play a central role for both the artist-healer practitioners and their audiences/patients.