

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 7: Devotion or Degradation? Reassessing the Love Mysticism Inherent to Graves' Poetics



The image above (of the 'ancient scapegoat') 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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1. Autumn and Winter: Death Drums of the Poet's Tragic Narrative

'The Theme, briefly, is the antique story, which falls into thirteen chapters and an epilogue, of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year, and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird.¹

By the mid-to-late 1940s, Graves felt he had uncovered the central myth narrative of his life. We have discussed its historical and mythological accuracies and possible inaccuracies already, as well as its origins in the works of various 19th and early 20th century anthropologists, archaeologists and mythographers. His book *The White Goddess*, and to a lesser extent 'The Black Goddess' essay, outline a story arc composed of a set number of story beats. This story arc, as I have argued in earlier chapters, amounts to a kind of transhistoric tragic romance involving both gods and humans. Graves describes the central characters and the inter-relational dramas of the romance quite precisely, and there is no doubt that to him the poet's acceptance of the role of the 'God of the Waxing Year'—despite all its vicissitudes and suffering—rewards poets not only with an authentic view of male to female love relations, but also with a primordially tested, as it were, model for a kind of 'sacred technology of poetic/creative inspiration'.

Put more simply, this ancient (according to Graves) and endlessly recurring mythopoetic love-tragedy (also a 'love triangle') offers poets a blueprint for living a fulfilled creative life as 'true poets'. He also believed that the narrative represents a primordial bedrock, back-wall or international archetypal pattern for the creation of true poetry in nonpatriarchal primordial traditions the world-over. Regardless, then, of its accuracy in describing and explaining humanity's psycho-historical, religious and socio-cultural history there is no doubt that for Graves it became the centre of his personal poetics and even acted as a kind of personal religion. We also note that his devotion to the Triple Goddess led him to judge all other narratives and sources of inspiration for poetry as 'inauthentic'.

To make sense of the final quarter century of Graves' working life (i.e. the early 1950s to about 1975, i.e. from his mid-50s until his 80th birthday) we have to understand the degree to which he accepted and acted out his role in the one true myth narrative—a narrative that demanded love and devotion by the poet to the Muse Goddess regardless of her behaviour toward him.

We perhaps need to acknowledge the extent to which he consciously acted out not only the joyous early beats of the narrative (those associated with the sacred King-Poet's Birth (and Childhood) and early Adult Life (i.e. the phase of a relatively unimpeded love affair with the Goddess), but also the middle and later, more tragic, beats to do with the Waxing Year God (or poet) being gradually rejected by the Goddess (i.e. ritually sacrificed) from Mid-Summer through to Autumn. The Resurrection phase begins in winter and is complete by the time of the beats associated with the springtime Birth-Rebirth phase.² The myth narrative is circular and obviously seasonal, i.e. based upon the eternal recurrence of the movements of the earth, sun, moon, planets etc. through the heavens and the impact these

¹ Robert Graves, *T.W.G.* p. 24, Faber and Faber, 1961 and 1986.

² Although Graves certainly outlines the general narrative arc and story beats 'briefly', as he puts it, of the myth narrative (see the quote from the book opening this Chapter), the specific beats are not listed by Graves in *T.W.G.*, or anywhere else, to my knowledge. Even perusing Frazer's *The Golden Bough* doesn't further us much, since he is equally generalist about the fate of the Dying Gods and God-King's he discusses, and besides, Graves altered Frazer's ideas—in particular by expanding the role of the Goddess—before incorporating them into *T.W.G.*.

movements have on animal, plant and human life at various stages of the year. Here is Graves elaborating more deeply on the narrative associated with the one True Poetic Theme, this time from later in *T.W.G.*:

The Son [i.e. of the Goddess, i.e. The God of the Waxing Year], who was also called Lucifer or Phosphorus ('bringer of light') because as evening-star he led in the light of the Moon, was reborn every year, grew up as the year advanced, destroyed the Serpent [i.e. the God of the Waning Year], and won the Goddess's love. Her love destroyed him, but from his ashes was born another Serpent, which, at Easter, laid the *glain* or red egg which she ate; so that the Son was reborn to her as a child once more.³

Much of the relational chaos, emotional excesses and (according to some) masochism, not to mention some of the wonderful fiction, theory texts and poetry, that marked Graves' life from the early 1950s to the onset of Alzheimer's disease in the mid-1970s, only becomes explicable when we understand that for him subjection to the story's tragic Autumnal and Winter beats (i.e. the 'Sacrifice' and 'Death' beats) was a necessary experience for every poet loyal to the Triple Goddess.⁴

The major biographies detailing Graves' life typically describe a series of love relationships, perhaps starting at the Charterhouse School, involving Graves's idealisation of a fickle love interest who inspires him, but also, eventually, makes him feel insecure. The love interest eventually betrays and rejects Graves. This cycle was repeated often throughout his life and according to the biographers it saw him swing back and forth between emotional ecstasy (symbolically: early Spring and Summer) and misery (symbolically: Autumn and Winter) depending upon the state and stage of a particular love affair.⁵ The rhythms of this love cycle (or 'love tragedy') certainly proved creatively lucrative to Graves—i.e. they birthed world-class poetry, fiction and nonfiction throughout the later decades of his life and provided an ongoing source for creative motivation. However, the interplay of real human beings with supposed deities, and the tendency to interpret the lives of human carriers of divinities (i.e. as something like human/divine hybrids) in terms of the narrative beats of a somewhat rigid 'primordial' myth narrative was always going to prove domestically messy. Did Graves' refusal to revisit the 19th century anthropological and mythographic evidence make him miss the opportunity to make his poetic more universalistic, more life-affirming and more relevant to the challenges facing people in life? Such a question may seem speculative, but when we look more closely at the complex psycho-spiritual expectations attributed to shamans and poets in primordial traditions studied by anthropologists and others we see that the question proves legitimate.

Let us look, firstly, at: a) why Graves might have ignored evidence from primordial cultures that did not fit his theory; and b) the consequences of him refusing to adapt his theories to the new evidence. I suspect his simplistic misreading—due to Frazer, in

³ Robert Graves, *T.W.G.* p. 388, Faber and Faber, 1961 and 1986.

⁴ His later-life attempts to 'worship' fickle young muses who inevitably betrayed him for rivals makes for gruelling reading in Bruce King's recent biography, as well as in the biographies by Miranda Seymour and Richard Perceval Graves.

⁵ Miranda Seymour's biography, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge*, devotes a number of chapters specifically to Graves' post 1950s Muses: i.e. Chapter 27 Judith (Bledsoe), Chapt. 31 Margot (Callas), Chapt. 33 The Poet and His Muse, Chapt. 34 The Black Goddess (concerning Cindy Lee/Aemilia Laracuen); and Chapt. 35 'The Last Muse' (i.e. Julia Simon). Martin Seymour Smith's biography on Graves, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, has sections concerning all of these women starting on p. 440 through to p. 576. Bruce King's *Robert Graves: A Biography* treads the same path from p. 151 to p. 214. R.P Graves in *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* also writes about his uncle's various post-1940s 'Muses' in the chapters from p. 171 to p. 511.

particular—of primordial myth narratives for poets and Muses/Goddesses, as well as his tendency to simplify ancient Goddess traditions into monotheistic or tripartite models, led to a somewhat ethnocentric misreading of the personalities, psyches, relationship values and social concerns of what he called ‘primordial womankind’. This misreading snowballed into a misreading of the supposed ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ traits ideally associated with modern women (traits Graves claimed had been suppressed due to patriarchy’s historic ascendancy).

We could argue that four factors discouraged Graves from delving more deeply—in terms of psychological and historic analysis—into his chosen myth narrative, one that fused female independence and inconstancy, with aggressive forms of male rivalry:

1. He seems to have genuinely convinced himself (after reading Jane Harrison, James Frazer, Margaret Murray, etc.) that the myth narrative was both the primordial ‘origin’ myth explaining the life paths of primordial creatives, and a kind of gold mine of inspirational possibilities for poets and creatives of all eras;
2. The evidence of Graves’ personal history as an artist, particularly after the publication of *T.W.G.* in the 1940s, perhaps suggested to him that he was being blessed (by the Muse Goddess) not only with remarkable poems, stories, nonfiction books etc., but also with international success and fame. This perhaps reinforced the idea that he had been chosen as a conduit for a kind of global 20th century ‘resurrection’ of the Great Goddess. So, why mess with a tried and tested formula that had brought him so much success?
3. Given his devotion to the Goddess and the myth drama had led to international fame, he perhaps felt a little pressured to augment and continue the initial epiphanies (contained in both his poetry and *T.W.G.*) by revisiting the inspirational relational techniques that had underpinned his success.
4. Although a number of ‘Muses’ were later invited to play the role of the fickle Great Goddess (and were even, in a sense, expected to eventually fall for ‘devilish rivals/Serpents’—i.e. ‘Gods of the Waning Year’), there is little doubt that the key epiphanies behind *T.W.G.* arrived in the wake of Riding’s ‘abdication’ and subsequent marriage to Schuyler B. Jackson, an event which coincided with Graves falling in love with Beryl Pritchard. It is possible that Graves simply did not know how to recover what he’d lost due to Riding’s departure from his life (i.e. her ‘abdication’). At the height of his success in the 1950s, he may well have felt both triumphant and strangely defeated, since his devotion to the Muse Goddess, though leading to outward success as a writer and poet, had distanced him further from Riding.

Fatalistic submission to the middle and later beats of Graves’ favoured primordial myth suggested a violent, bloody ending to the poet’s reign (i.e. beginning with the loss of the Muse Goddess’s favours and blessings and concluding in the actual sacrifice of the sacred King-Poet). Inherent to these beats is the total rejection of the male poet as he ages—i.e. as the Goddess opts for new wild, sinister and virile lover. For Graves, this process of gradually losing ground to an almost supernatural rival is inevitable, a part of the poet’s archetypal life journey—though we note that he was sometimes quite nasty to the real life rivals favoured by his various later-life Muses. The male poet, according to Graves, must endure the final story beats with few grumbles and accept his preordained role to the bittersweet end—i.e. he must maintain ongoing devotion to the Muse in spite of her fickleness, infidelity and ultimate abandonment of him.

There was, however, no literal violent, bloody ending for Graves, thankfully, but the final few years of his life were, by all accounts, difficult to witness as a passage from Miranda Seymour’s biography about him demonstrates:

Some [old friends] were distressed to see him dressed like a child in a baby-blue caftan and being given children's presents in brightly coloured paper for his eighty-fourth birthday. Many were grieved by the fact that Graves's mind had evidently turned back to the war, engendering terrible guilt. 'I am in hell', he said to Honor Wyatt, when she visited him in 1979. To his nephew, Paul Cooper, he spoke of having killed more than a hundred Germans.⁶

Clearly, with his memory and cognitive skills declining, the raw horror of his experiences in the trenches of WWI returned to haunt him, and thus, in a way, he did receive an ending not unlike that of the Dying God-King so central to the poetics of *T.W.G.* Indeed, the prolonged psychological torture of re-experiencing, year after year, the terrifying events of his youth reminds us of some of the worst scenes from Dante's *Inferno*.

Graves' stubborn, obsessive (some might say), adherence to all phases of the role he believed the Triple Muse required of him, is discomforting to many secular scholars and readers—even those who enjoy his poetry, fiction and prose. The mistaken conclusion we might entertain here, is to assert that precisely because some aspects of the final phases of his personal life seem so absurd, pathetic, tragic, self-delusionary, etc. we should also reject as worthless many of the hard-fought insights embedded in Graves' books and poems. Likewise, we might assert that Graves' behaviour i.e. chasing after a succession of, usually, younger women (Muses), automatically degrades the psycho-spiritual authenticity of his Muse Goddess texts. Such a perspective, though very much in keeping with the mood of our times, is less applicable as a judgement to the heady counter-culture decades of the 1960s and 1970s. It would see us adopt a somewhat dreary, sanitised, prudish and conventional perspective—one that declares: "True Revelations Must Always Be Morally Pristine and Lead to Happy Endings to Be Valid and Worthy of Cultural Preservation!"

However, we need to accept that Graves' chosen myth narrative never promised him (or us) a happy conclusion; indeed, it always contained explicitly tragic elements—especially in the later chapters/beats of the arc. It had also been designed to critique the damaging, oppressive and hypocritical sexual morays of post-Victorian English society. Any attempts to change the innate morals of a society are always going to be messy—dead ends, partial regressions, problematic experiments, etc. are always possible in liminal times. Similarly, the 'prophets of the new' are rarely given a smooth ride and are often judged more harshly than those who conform.

It seems that for Graves, the narrative drama of the poet's inevitable diminishment—by illness, dwindling talent, foolishness, self-humiliation, relationship turmoil, the passing on of allies and friends, loss of creative relevance, etc. in short, by the gradual loss of physical and mental abilities due to the ageing process—had to be acted out semi-publicly by being made visible in story and verse. Consciously or otherwise, Graves accepted his fate as preordained in the final beats of the fatalistic myth narrative associated with his beloved female deity. For him, acceptance of his fate may have represented a kind of gruelling and enduring devotion to the Triple Goddess.

2. Alternative Interpretations: Wrong Turns and Lost Opportunities for Transformation

Acknowledging Graves' likely later life point of view, however, does not absolve us of the responsibility of looking more deeply at the consequences of his perspectives on the overall integrity and consistency of the 'religion of the Goddess' his work helped (re)birth. Did he, in

⁶ Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (p.459-60).

truth, remain 'loyal' in those decades to the Goddess, her moral system and her rules for lovers?

There are two ways of approaching this question; firstly, we could measure his actions in those final decades against the overall argument of *T.W.G.* Secondly, we could revisit Graves' arguments in the book to take account of some of the internal inconsistencies and more blatant inaccuracies presented in the book, and then, after due clarification, measure Graves' later-life actions against the revised more scholastically accurate model. This second approach may seem a little unfair to Graves, but it is an important strategy if the work is to remain relevant into our era. My hunch is that the scholarly errors, silences and inconsistencies embedded in *T.W.G.* eventually flowed through into Graves' understandings of ideal Muse and Poet relationships. The same issues eventually played out in Graves' later life love relationships, where what he announced as personal acts of devotion to the Triple Goddess invite less idealistic alternative interpretations.

Graves' narrowing of the breadth of antique Goddess traditions to what we might call a single 'Love Goddess/Muse' tradition⁷ associated with, for example, deities like Aphrodite, Hathor, Ishtar, Venus, Sjöfn, Parvati, Rati, etc. is all of a piece, in its own way, with the narrowing manoeuvres of the Catholic Church in the later Roman period. In that tradition, the breadth, diversity and lifespan adaptability of a range of female deities were systematically reduced to a single role, that of the Virgin Mary, who was, in the end, 'de-deified' to make way for the all-male religion associated with Medieval Catholic Christianity.

When we note that Graves' later life acts of devotion involved chasing, wooing, keeping, etc. a succession of young Muses—and in several cases funding their overseas trips, houses, clothes, etc. and even using his celebrity/fame and connections for the benefit of some of his Muses—we are entitled to ask whether such behaviour is not in keeping with long established social and economic principles deeply embedded in patriarchal societies. We are also entitled to ask whether an authentic Great Goddess would condone Graves' apparent neglect of whole sections of the female lifespan as well as social roles often adopted by older women e.g. grandmothers, family and community leaders, vocational experts/teachers, etc.. In addition, mid-life and later-life female romantic desire is all but ignored by Graves' version of the Goddess—indeed, Graves has very little to say in *The White Goddess* about women over 40. Even the wisdom figure of the Black Goddess (as outlined in his later essay on the topic) is largely confined to the role of a male poet's lover/Muse.⁸ Finally, the transformative possibilities of sexual experiences (of any orientation) are strangely absent from the 'love mysticism' of *T.W.G.*—unless we count the cameo descriptions of the activities of 'orgiastic priestesses' coupling with all and sundry—including deities—in moonlit *nemetons* dedicated to the old gods. Here, however, we need to acknowledge that the book was first published during an era in which open discussion of sexuality was heavily censored.

I'm suggesting, overall, that Graves' occasional refusal to factually back up his perspectives on the actual history of ancient Goddess traditions,⁹ as well as the actual worldviews and social conditions of 'primordial womankind', facilitated a back-door re-entry into his poetics of some of the worst features of patriarchal relational norms. The Great Goddess is quite often, defined in shallow terms (put bluntly in terms associated with

⁷ Moreover, at times, narrowing it further to the *femme fatale* archetype in ancient Love Goddess traditions.

⁸ Graves' one foray into a generalist sociological and psychological account of 'the real woman', included in his book *The Black Goddess and Mammon* (1965, first published 1962, pp. 101-113) is a difficult read as it has dated badly. Nevertheless, the essay counts as an elaboration on various gender themes also canvassed in *T.W.G.*.

⁹ We must also note Graves' refusal to reassess—under pressure of critics aware of mid-20th century scholarly findings—the historic and archaeological evidence he embedded in *T.W.G.*.

consumer capitalism's mid-century imperatives) as a deity easily bought off by male offers of airline tickets, jewellery, fashion accessories, closeness to fame and fortune, and even gifts of houses and cars.

A mitigating way to look at his later life interpretations of ancient Goddess traditions and relational norms, however, would be to argue that perspectives on life he had long expressed through his fiction, as well as some of his nonfiction—perspectives, by the way, fundamental to international Modernism—ended up (by the 1960s) unconsciously infecting his poetics and maybe even his poetry. We might point to Realist and even mildly Existentialist creative sub-selves in Graves—sub-selves born, perhaps, of experiences of childhood brutality at the hands of boarding school bullies.¹⁰

Likewise, of witnessing close-up the senseless mass brutality, dehumanisation and slaughter that unfolded in the trenches of WW1. Arguably, the creative conflict between his more cynical and realist creative sub-selves *and* his more idealist and utopian poetic self, helped Graves create works that deservedly brought him international literary fame.

Graves' often unacknowledged cynicism and realism about the world's madness, absurdity, political corruption and brutality were always evident in his fiction—for example, in the Claudius novels, as well as in *Count Belisarius*, *King Jesus* and *The Isles of Unwisdom*. In these books, as well as in others, e.g. *The Story of Marie Powell: Wife of Mr. Milton*, and *Seven Days in New Crete*, with its bloody sacrifice scene, Graves' worldly understandings of social realities undermine even the most apparently idealistic love and communal love relationships. In several, the main protagonist figure struggles to maintain personal integrity in the face of society's monstrous dehumanising and corrupting imperatives. Such themes are loosely Existentialist in character and as such represent a strong Modernist strain in Graves' fiction work. These aspects of his world-view were also evident in his autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*—a classic of its genre that reveals Graves at his realist, semi-existentialist and therefore Modernist best.

Does the tragic fatalism inherent to Graves' chosen interpretation of Frazer's 'sacrificial king' narrative represent the more realistic worldview of one of Graves' creative sub-selves—a sub-self determined to apply the brakes, so to speak, to the more idealistic, utopian and neo-Romantic tendencies evident in many sections of *T.W.G.*?

We have noted in an earlier chapter that in the earliest chapters of Harrison's famous work, *Themis*, she opted for a different interpretation of the 'rending to pieces' myth that became so central to Graves' poetic, when she associated it with initiatory/puberty rites for young men, i.e. a psycho-spiritual ritual of growth conducted in order to assist young men to negotiate the liminal spaces between childhood and adulthood. In short, many ancient 'rending to pieces' experiences, on Harrison's reading, are metaphorical (even 'pretend', i.e. dramatisations) and are better understood as ritual techniques aimed at moving people through particular stages of the lifespan on the way to new stages.

A similar 'rending to pieces' phenomenon—one representing the actual initiatory experiences reported by tribal healer-shamans, cult-leaders and sacred story-tellers—was outlined to some depth by Eliade in his seminal work on shamanism.¹¹ Eliade noted that a psycho-symbolic experience of 'ego-annihilation' or 'rending to pieces' followed by 'ego reconstruction' or 'resurrection' (i.e. as a new person with a new role in the community) was fundamental to the process of becoming a shaman. Modern research suggests that such

¹⁰ It is possible that Graves picked up existentialist ways of thinking from not only other Modernist poets, but also Nietzsche (who is often categorised as a precursor to the main thrust of 20th century Existentialism). We note that Graves had read Nietzsche in his youth and wrote an essay on him that was later published in *The Crowning Privilege* "Essays from 'Epilogue' (1935-37), 1. Nietzsche", p. 267-279, in *The Crowning Privilege*, Pelican Books, 1959, first published 1955.

¹¹ Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Arkania, 1989.

experiences are evident across a range of the world's indigenous traditions. Eliade even documents instances of female 'spirit wives' assisting shamans through demanding initiatory experiences. These same figures sometimes become ongoing professional partners for shamans—Muses or *Soror Mysticas* of sorts?

When we combine the metaphorical 'rending to pieces' experiences of shamans with the idea of 'spirit wives' we come close to an historically verified version of the Muse and Poet relationship outlined by Graves in *T.W.G.*. However, we must emphasise that for indigenous shamans the rending process is psycho-spiritual and life-affirming in nature, both for the shaman and for the community he (or she or they) serves. This truly primordial myth narrative—also with its distinct story beats—is somewhat different to the one Graves adopted.

We note that whenever Graves needed to transition to a new stage in his creative life a Muse figure (representing the Goddess) was usually selected. Some of his Muses apparently put him through a gruelling psychological (therefore symbolic) version of the 'rending to pieces' process. We might even argue that elements of such a symbolic rending experience might well parallel beats in the 'Dying God' myth—consequently the shamanic myth narrative might be seen as a kind of cousin to the Graves (via Frazer) narrative. Indeed, such a choice of narrative might even seem quite logical to a love poet such as Graves. Nevertheless, we would still need to identify and explore more deeply the constituent elements of Graves', largely un-acknowledged, 'Love Mysticism' and then contrast these elements with shamanic narratives.

We surely stretch the biographical facts beyond credibility if we assert that his many later life Muse experiences represented conscious attempts at psycho-spiritual growth—though here the picture is complex, since various biographers have suggested that Cindy Lee (one of his later life Muses) assisted Graves to overcome aspects of his Victorian prudishness on matters of sex. Similarly, there is evidence that Graves was experimenting with consciousness-raising psychedelics whilst in the midst of several of his 'Muse experiences'.¹² I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether or not Graves' devotion to his chosen 'myth narrative' achieved forms of personal growth capable of matching those of the ancient shamans—the original, primordial 'technicians of the sacred'.

Regardless of one's verdict, it is well to re-state here that Graves' favoured myth narrative is not the only primordial myth narrative available to poets. Also, the roles of female spirits, Goddesses, etc., in the shamanic myth narratives of many cultures, though often present, and sometimes prominent, rarely constellate around the triangular (some would say Oedipal) love dramas that Graves places at the heart of *T.W.G.*.

3. Tentative Renovations of Components of Graves' Unacknowledged System of 'Love Mysticism'

The love lives of poets and their Muses/lovers might seem a profoundly fragile and ephemeral thing upon which to build an enduring spiritual system or religion—let alone a functional moral framework for a truly humane civilisation capable of addressing the many pressing issues facing our species. For those who love Graves' ideas and wish to believe in the possibility of better relations between the genders as the foundation for a better society and world, we might agree that the biographical details of his Muse experiments between 1950 or so and the mid-1970s make for difficult reading.

Rejecting the poetics of *T.W.G.* completely would thus be understandable, but ultimately something of a mistake. In the final third of this chapter I will suggest a number of

¹² Robert Perceval Graves, p. 327 of *Robert Graves and The White Goddess (1940-1985)*.

relatively minor renovations to Graves' declared, but also undeclared (as it were), theories around 'Love Mysticism' (theories that have contributed to the development of a kind of 'Love/Sex Religion' among modern neo-pagans). Our guiding question is: Might the theories presented in *T.W.G.*, once critiqued and adapted for the realities of primordial creative traditions, yet provide a useful framework for modern creatives in need of proven pathways for self-transformation that involve creative practices?

1. Although the intimate love relationship can certainly be seen as potentially transformative when viewed and experienced in a certain light, Graves' almost claustrophobic emphasis on a mythically suspect and tragic archetypal version of the relationship—and the key actors involved in it—is puzzling and needs challenging. An alternative vision for a revised poetic would be a primordial myth narrative facilitating positive psycho-spiritual transformation—where needed—throughout a love relationship.
2. The historical evidence in terms of poets and, indeed, most creative artists, as well as some famous alchemists (for whom the mysterious *soror mystica* figure oversees the Great Work) suggests that for poet/artists the love relationship—of the many and varied relationships significant in our lives—often seems to hold pride of place. In this sense, Muses have always been important to creatives in order for them to create their works. However, this fact does not justify Graves privileging the Dying King narrative (a tragic love narrative, we note) as the fundamental narrative underpinning the creative and transformative possibilities of a poetic linked to the Triple Muse Goddess. Linking this narrative to ancient Muse-Goddess traditions also meant that Graves saw all 'true' male poets as essentially polyamorous, in terms of their relations with human 'Muse-vessel' lovers, *but* monogamous, strangely enough, in their love for the Muse Goddess herself. Both the human Muse-vessel and the Triple Goddess, on the other hand, are to be taken as essentially polyamorous in their love relations. Whether such a complex relationship nexus is really the best one for the creation of 'authentic' poetry is disputable, and, certainly, anthropologically unproven. There is some evidence to suggest that 20th century Bohemian relationship norms emphasising free love and polygamy, were simply applied as unproven norms to a range of 'primordial (i.e. Indigenous and First Nations) peoples. We need to assess a range of other primordial love relationship norms and narratives for further guidance.
3. Graves' later life Muse relationships typically attempted to fit various young Muses into the straightjacket of the Dying King mythic narrative. In the process, he also tended to privilege particular stages of love relationships and demoted or ignored (as boring and uncreative) other stages. The high adrenalin, emotionally charged, adventures of: a) forming a relationship (and risking rejection); b) the first intense sexual encounters; and c) the stage of being betrayed by the lover were described as virtually the only elements of love experiences capable of producing authentic poetry. Long-term love experiences were dismissed as inevitably un-inspirational and therefore more or less unworthy of poets, poetry and genuine muses.¹³ Indeed, almost no other relationship—short term or long term—carried the inspirational fire needed to create authentic poetry. We are entitled to assess evidence for long-term love experiences that remain both transformational and inspirational. In addition, how might a poet's poetry suffer if poems about long-term love relationships, or about other types of significant relationships, are deemed irrelevant to 'authentic poetry'? We need to develop a 'poetics of the Goddess' that acknowledges the poetic possibilities of long-term love relationships, but that also addresses the kind of 'toxic emotions' that many long-term

¹³ Some biographers have argued, however, that the evidence of Graves' own emotional life after Riding's departure suggests that her influence on him as a 'Muse' was long-term rather than fleeting, even though he eventually declared that the Muse Goddess had departed Riding's psyche (i.e. de-possessed her?) around the time she had renounced poetry.

love relationships often fall victim to.

4. Graves' pronounced that for male poets only heterosexual love experiences (and, even then, only certain stages of the heterosexual love experiences) produce the mental and emotional charge necessary to birth 'authentic poetry'. In short, Graves' mid-20th century tome applies the repressive binary gender roles and perspectives on 'right' forms of sexual orientation to all facets of his Love Mysticism. This however, is to ignore the historical evidence arising from a range of primordial poetic traditions, myths and rites that feature poets, shamans, bards, druids, etc. and their inspirational gay or third gender 'Muses'. We need to consider a more expansive Love Mysticism and poetics in our revisions of *T.W.G.*—one that admits the historic and mythological realities associated with countless inspirational and transformational creative relationships that fall outside heterosexual norms. It is not our job to pronounce on the authenticity, inspirational and transformative possibilities of any particular creative's relational experiences.

5. Graves' later life Muse experiences featured a sequence of, typically, younger women that inspired him and that he loved. Some reasons for these relationships ending include: betrayal (by the Muse-vessel, of Graves); loss of attraction (by either party), disinterest and indifference (usually on the part of the Muse-vessel), etc.. When a relationship fizzled out, Graves usually accepted the woman's decision to break things off, and typically rationalised the situation by stating simply that the Goddess had departed the Muse-vessel. The long-term relationship between himself and his second wife, Beryl, was apparently 'open' and thus, at least on the surface, he was not committing infidelity when he engaged in extra-marital romances. However, his own feelings of boredom, disinterest, etc. with love interests, as well as his apparent need to repeat the same relationship pattern repeatedly was rarely questioned by Graves, and thus his Muse-Goddess theory did not, apparently, confront the existential deadening that perhaps sat behind his rapid turnover of Muses.¹⁴ We need a system of Love Mysticism, and an accompanying poetics, expansive enough to address 'love compulsions' as well as forms of psycho-spiritual deadening, chronic ennui, disenchantment and alienation.

6. In Graves' theory a human vessel is possessed by a deity as a means for the deity to release into the world songs, poems, art works, etc. As the relationship gets underway and progresses, the poet too is, for a time, inhabited by a deity, i.e. 'The God of the Waxing Year.' The love relationship between the Poet and the Muse is thus, according to Graves, a four-entity affair. The nature of these experiences of temporary or sustained 'divine possession' is surely worthy of deeper exploration given these statements by Graves represent perhaps the most radical and problematic part of *T.W.G.*. Our modern classical scientific and quantum scientific paradigms invite us to dismiss these parts of the book, however, the archaic traditions Graves was acquainted with, as well as anthropological evidence drawn from various primordial societies suggests that various forms of deity, ancestor and spirit possession are evident across a range of primordial societies. Ancient literary and spiritual texts also explore the phenomenon, for example, in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* various deities routinely possess mortals to deliver messages, give advice, etc. Many other world traditions acknowledge routine forms of divine possession, for example, among Hindus a major yogic pathway to spiritual growth, specifically Tantric Yoga, involves forms of mutual divine possession accompanied by intimate love practices. Because our age rejects the possibility of 'divine possession' does not mean we can dismiss such phenomena out of hand. That said, we are entitled to assess exactly what Graves might have meant when he described the

¹⁴ We have not heard much over the years from Graves' various later-life Muses, however, we do have records of Riding's objections about being type-cast (and not just by Graves but by the literary and critical communities) as the beautiful but cruel and heartless idol simultaneously made responsible for Graves' creative output. She wrote a number of truly vitriolic letters, as well as other pieces, condemning Graves for inviting others to see her in this light.

possession experience as fundamental to Muse-inspired relationships.¹⁵ Other questions might clarify this largely occult phenomenon: How exactly does the possession occur? Are both partners typically aware of the presence of the Goddess in the Muse-vessel? Can a deity possess someone without the person knowing of its presence? How long does a possession last? What does a fake Muse-possession experience look like? Of course, just because Graves pronounces the presence of the Muse Goddess in, usually, an attractive woman, does not mean possession has actually occurred. It is difficult, indeed, to speculate further on this topic, or indeed to know how to analyze it for revised inclusion in our proposed renovated ‘Love Mysticism’ system. However, it is worth stating that possession experiences as a means to inspire creative pursuits are fundamental to the poetics of *T.W.G.*. At times, however, Graves seems to imply that all that is necessary to affirm the presence of the Muse in a woman is his sense of falling in love with her. Similarly, all that is required to affirm the departure of the Goddess from her chosen Muse-vessel is the emotional experience of him falling *out of love* with the human woman involved. On this reading, emotional energies can all-but substitute for deities.

The six elements of Graves’ ‘Love Mysticism’ religion (also a system for creative inspiration) discussed above probably read quite strangely for many modern readers. Graves’s thinking on these topics might even seem to suggest little more than a recipe for personal and relational chaos and disaster. However, I’d like to suggest that we need to add a further element to the equation before readers abandon the ‘Love Mysticism’ implicit to *T.W.G.*, since there may yet be a way to assess whether a given relationship is likely to end badly *or* perhaps lead Poet and/or Muse into experiences of personal transformation. It is always useful to assess the true motivations of poets. Typically, this involves assessing their conscious and unconscious poetics.

Some Thoughts on Poetic Motivation

There is a difference between ordinary love relationships and what we might call ‘creative’ love relationships. This is because, whether openly acknowledged or not, creative goals for one or both of the partners permeate the establishment and course of the relationship. Dame Art is present at every stage of the relationship—even in the bedroom. Inevitably, this presence adds an extra burden to intimate relationships. This is especially the case if the ‘poetics’ expressed by the poet is in any way complicit with prevalent forms of social dehumanisation, exploitation and objectification. Given competitive, money-obsessed, and celebrity, ego and fame-driven values—values central to extreme Neoliberalism—permeate almost all areas of many modern creative milieus, creatives entangled in something like a ‘Love Mysticism’ relationship have to be doubly on guard and determined to critique and neutralise these disruptive external forces before they infiltrate the relationship.

Central to this process will be personal honesty about a creative’s true motivations for pursuing a creative career. Creatives of all kinds—whilst under the influence of their ‘Muse-vessels’— might express a range of motivations for their creative activities:

Type A: They might create in a way that uses the heightened feelings associated with their Muse-vessel to further their own career objectives, i.e. to attain, or maintain, fame, celebrity, income or the love of their audience. This most selfish and usually unchallenged of paths typically involves a dishonest, or limited, declaration of love for the Muse-vessel since self-

¹⁵ We also note that Laura Riding, at least in her later life, vehemently objected to Graves’s insinuations that she had been Goddess-possessed during their thirteen-year long relationship.

interest (self-aggrandisement) and a desire to use another person are the real motivators here. The poet may even demand to be worshipped by the Muse-vessel, or lauded as a creative genius (or as a mad and unstable genius). Narcissism, of course, is the ‘Deadly Vice’ usually at play here;

Type B: Creatives might be motivated to create simply to impress the Muse-vessel or even perhaps to seduce the Muse-vessel into falling in love with the creative via the special qualities of the feelings and love declarations communicated through the creative’s work. The poet may also be motivated in this way during the final stages of a relationship or even after the relationship has ended, without necessarily addressing what has caused the Muse-vessel to ‘quit the scene’ so to speak. This type of motivation makes poetry, songs, art, stories, etc. into ‘love enchantments’ or ‘spells’. We are unlikely to witness genuine lasting self-transformation when this motivation alone is at play—however, usually it at least represents some sort of genuine declaration of love and desire, though it is not a declaration deep enough to make poets like this commit to changing substantial flaws in their personality. It is well to state that high quality works of art can, nevertheless, emerge through this kind of motivation.

Type C: A poet could also create to not only demonstrate love for the Muse-vessel but to show the Muse-vessel that the poet’s love (or desired love) is deep enough to make the poet genuinely pursue self-transformation and address problematic personality traits, etc. should the necessity arise during the relationship. Like ‘Type B’ above, this kind of motivation can also come into play either when the relationship begins to founder, after the relationship has ended or even after the Muse-vessel has died. This type of motivation, of the three under discussion, is most likely to produce both authentic creative works and authentic self-transformation in the poet, and possibly the Muse. This is because it explicitly allies literary/creative pursuits with an imperative for personal change. In addition, such an alliance tends to put the well-being of both the Poet and the Muse-Vessel, as well as their relationship, at the centre of what is to unfold. Finally, the issues that destroy love relationships (for both poet and Muse-vessel) typically expand beyond the confines of a relationship, i.e. to unprocessed traumatic childhood experiences, toxic social and cultural norms that have not been challenged by the poet, as well as to other problematic relational etc. experiences. A poet’s commitment to reassessing these kinds of toxic feeders into a relationship implies that regardless of whether the relationship is revived, the Poet is more committed to become a better human being for his own sake. Paradoxically, the poet moves beyond ‘love mysticism’ to something more all-encompassing by following this Type. Finally, this approach demands that the poet also assess more honestly any all-too-human flaws, etc. evident in the Muse-vessel’s personality in this scenario, since there is no imperative for the Muse-vessel to be placed on a pedestal and worshipped as a semi-perfect being.¹⁶ Type C, however, poses an interesting question: is there an effective primordial system for personal change that the poet could commit to in order to achieve the personal changes required?¹⁷

I will leave it up to readers to assess which of the three types of motivation were in play at specific stages of Graves’ life. However, in case readers are questioning the relevance of our

¹⁶ Many of the biographers note Graves’ tendency to see his Muses as perfect women with virtually no personality flaws or deficits. There is rarely any suggestion that they might also need to commit to change and growth, since for Graves they were vessels for the Triple Goddess and thus, being deity-possessed (chosen), all but perfect. His relationships with Laura Riding and Cindy Lee were particularly problematic in this respect. Expectations that mutual change and growth may be required corrects any impulses in the poet toward emotional masochism—it is not psychologically healthy, after all, to always see oneself as inferior to one’s lover (or Muse).

¹⁷ We’ll explore certain primordial traditions, as well as some more modern ones that are positive to artists and poets in the two chapters that will conclude this study.

argument here to our study of his Goddess-inspired 'Love Mysticism', they might ponder the scathing remarks made by Laura Riding in 1975 (i.e. thirty-five years after their relationship had ended). Her text casts doubt upon Graves' stated motivations for writing *T.W.G.*. I largely disagree with her critiques, however, her comments remain highly pertinent since she highlights the issue of a poet's motivations for writing about a Muse-vessel. In the following passage she questions many of Graves' motivations for writing *T.W.G.*:

Here is the crux of "White Goddess" matter: it was a literary machine designed for seizure of the essence of my reality, out of the literary plunder remaining from the destruction of the personal fact of me, for the authentication by Robert Graves, as *his*, of the solemn prating ventriloquial farce of religiose poetics with which he canvassed the upper-rank literary precincts.¹⁸

Also, in the same piece:

Robert Graves is a living incarnation of the type of literary robber-baron that ensconces itself in pseudo-palatial retreats, crudely thrown up in the wilds of literary rapacity, furnished with plunder so bewildering in its variety as to suggest to literary travellers an occupant having an above-the-law splendour of personality.¹⁹

By 1975, Graves' Alzheimer's condition was well-advanced, and though it is unlikely that he got to read Riding's critique (written in the same year), he would, most probably, have been unable to process its full meaning anyway (given his condition). Regardless, by some strange synchronicity, it seems that Riding's fierce dismissal (at that time unpublished) of Graves as a literary figure, coincided uncannily with the onset of the final major challenge of his life—a challenge that he did not survive. The irony of the two attacks on important aspects of his well-being coinciding needs comment. It could be argued that these twin events brought him under the sway of a key story beat linked to the Sacred God-King narrative, i.e. the beat in which the King, or God of the Waxing Year, is 'torn to pieces' at the hands of both his beloved Goddess and the disease of Alzheimer's, surely one of the cruellest fates imaginable for poets and writers.

Graves ended his working life as a writer and poet in 1975 (at the age of 80), and reportedly wrote no more poems thereafter.²⁰

Conclusion

Regardless of our personal perspective on Graves, his body of work and his Muse-based poetics, we have to acknowledge that *T.W.G.* was very much in keeping with the cultural zeitgeist of its time. Our judgements on his love experiments need to be seen as part of a much larger and more general 20th century 'revolution of intimacy' associated with: 1. the writings of Freud, Jung and Reich; 2. the writings of Kinsey and others on human sexuality; 3. the curious mixture of disinhibition, spiritual journeying and personal growth associated with the counterculture and New Age movements of the late-1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s;

¹⁸ Laura (Riding) Jackson, p. 209, 'Appendix: Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* in *The Word "Woman" and Other Related Writings*, Persea Books, 1993.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 211.

²⁰ It needs to be said, lest readers get the wrong idea, that in 1975, as Riding wrote 'Appendix: Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, she was unaware of the seriousness of Graves' deteriorating health situation.

4. anti-colonial and post-colonial reassessments of the role of sexual repression and spiritual forms of patriarchy in Western societies; and finally, and perhaps most importantly; 5. Third Wave Feminism and the gender and sexuality revolutions unleashed by all these ideologies and movements.

Obviously, we cannot judge Graves's work and insights on the links between love; sexuality; authentic forms of creativity; and the social, cultural and religious history of womankind, in isolation from mid-20th century cultural developments. In addition, it is worth pointing out that his peculiar brand of 'Love Mysticism' enjoyed, for a time, a remarkably widespread influence. Despite the weaknesses we've identified, it helped move millions of people away from toxic and outdated patriarchal understandings of love relationships and sexuality in the direction of more nuanced female-influenced perspectives.