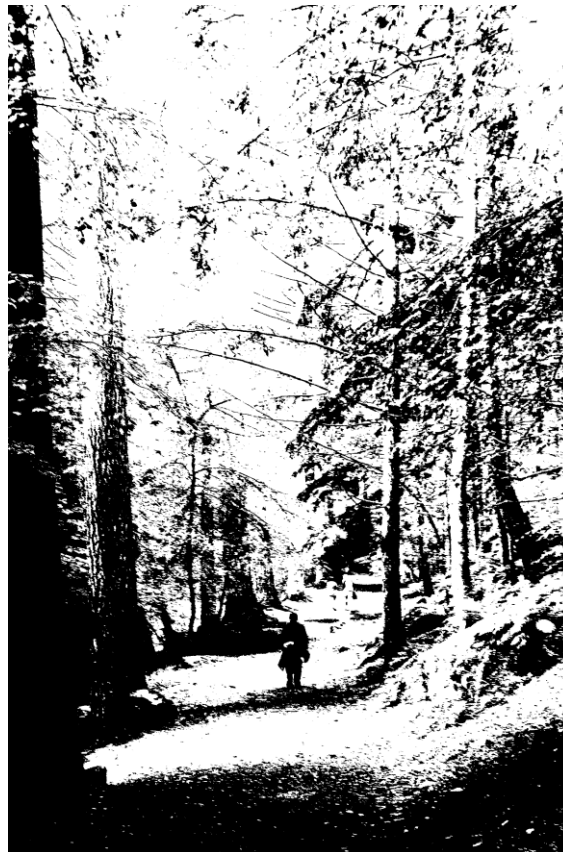


In Search of the Muse-Goddess: Creativity and Female Deities in the Work of Robert Graves

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

The first draft of this work was written in 1993 and presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a B.A. (Honours) degree at La Trobe University (Bendigo). Many revisions have been made to the original draft in order to update the general argument for a contemporary audience. This version of the work will be delivered in book instalments during 2022 and will run to approximately 50,000 words (a sizeable increase on the work's original word count).

Chapter 4: The Magic of Poetic Initiation: Garbled Poems, Tree Alphabets, Fantastic Creatures and Vanished Deities



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

Published by the Zoetics Institute, Bendigo, Australia.

One may think of poetry as being like a Religion, a modified descendant of primitive Magic: it keeps the family characteristic of stirring wonder by creating from unpromising lifeless materials an illusion of unexpected passionate life.¹

1. Introduction: The Vision in the Problematic Detail

As stated in the introduction to this work, almost two-thirds of *The White Goddess* is taken up with a complicated argument involving two ancient Welsh poems, i.e. the *Cad Goddeau* (or *Battle of the Trees*) and the *Hanes Taliesin* (or *Tale of Taliesin*). Graves uses D. W. Nash's 19th century English translation of the *Cad Goddeau* (though acknowledging its translation weaknesses), to argue that the original Welsh version of the poem had been deliberately 'scrambled' in a number of ways. Firstly, he believed that four or five distinct poems had become mixed up with the true *Cad Goddeau*. In his view, this caused the 'scrambled' text to read somewhat nonsensically, and meant that the lines of the other poems had to be identified and then removed from the source MS in order to reveal an historically 'authentic' *Cad Goddeau*. This he undertook in the early part of Chapter Two of *W.G.* He then identified a second level to the 'scrambling'—or 'concealment'—process, arguing that the remnant lines of the authentic *Battle of the Trees* had also been scrambled and thus were 'out of order' in the Welsh MS. The end of Chapter Two of *W.G.* sees Graves attempt to rearrange the remnant lines in a more poetically logical way. This process resulted in a tentative restoration of *The Battle of the Trees* at the end of Chapter Two. The 'restored' work, however, is presented in English and in ballad form. At the end of this process Graves writes: 'The work I have done here is not offered as in any sense final.'

Dr Gwilym Morus-Baird² uses Marged Haycock's more recent (and more accurate) English translation of the Welsh MS version of the poem (see *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin*, published in 2015), to highlight a number of problems with Graves's analysis in Chapter Two of *W.G.*. Firstly, D. W. Nash's version contained many translation errors that eventually flowed through into Graves's final version of the *Cad Goddeau*. According to Morus-Baird, Graves's reconstruction of the poem also violated—in various places—the poetic structuring and logic implicit to the original Welsh version of the poem. For example, when Graves rearranged the poem's lines (using Nash's problematic translation) he seemed to ignore the fact that in the original Welsh, many groups of lines were rhymed in poetically logical and satisfying ways (sometimes as couplets, sometimes as longer end-line rhyme sequences). Consequently, although Graves offered up some poignant new poetic ballad end-rhymes (in English) as a consequence of the 'reordering' process, these are, essentially, modern creative flourishes since reading the reordered lines back against the original Welsh leads to rhyming and rhythmic errors previously absent in the handed down Welsh MS.

Thus, although Graves tried to produce a more poetically logical version of the *Cad Goddeau* (which he set in English, using quatrains featuring variable ballad rhyme schemes), the move created some new and formidable problems.

This, however, is just the beginning of our problems, since, having completed the reordering task, Graves uses the new version of the poem—recall it is one of two key poems (the other one being the *Hanes Taliesin*, which he also unscrambles and re-interprets)—to unlock the mystery of a proposed Bronze Age clash between two peoples who believed in

¹ Graves, *On English Poetry*, pg. 19 (1922).

² See his 25 minute discussion of issues arising out of Graves's use of the inadequate Nash translation, entitled 'The Tree Alphabet and the White Goddess', to be found at: <https://youtu.be/KDFTTrR2qwA> (accessed 7th Sept. 2022).

two different religions and also used different versions of the Ogham alphabet. Graves writes:

I first suspected that an alphabet was contained in Gwion's conundrum when I began to restore the purposely jumbled text of *The Battle of the Trees*, which refers to a primitive tradition of the capture of an oracular shrine by the guessing of a god's name. This capture seems to have taken place early in the fourth century BCE when the Belgic Brythons worshippers of the Ash-god Gwydion, with the help of an agricultural tribe already settled in Britain, seized the national shrine, perhaps Avebury, from the reigning priesthood... The letter-names of Gwion's alphabet [as un-riddled by Graves in Chapter Seven of *W.G.* from the later poem 'Gwion's Riddle'] apparently conceal the name of the transcendent God, whom Caesar calls Dis, worshipped in Britain and Gaul. It may be inferred that the earlier alphabet, containing a pre-Belgic religious secret, had a different series of letter names from those concealed in Gwion's conundrum, that the alphabetical order began with B.L.N., not B.L.F. and that after the capture of the shrine the divine name was altered.³

Graves's ultimate argument is that a primordial version of Ogham (the ancient British 'language of the Goddess') fell into disuse after the defeat of the people of the Goddess (and their male Crow deity, Bran) by the Belgic invaders (who were supported by tribes of indigenous Britons and worshipped a more or less Apollonian—by which Graves infers 'patrilineal'—deity called Beli).

The ordering of verses in the *Cad Goddeau* (and the *Hanes Taliesin*) then, turn out to be important links in Graves's proposal that the Ogham alphabets used by the two warring peoples, were distinct versions of a druidic 'tree alphabet'. The *Cad Goddeau* and the *Hanes Taliesin* thus conceal, according to Graves, a religious secret—passed on down the centuries—to do with the earlier Ogham tree alphabet, and a primordial matriarchal 'Muse-Goddess' religion.

It is no small task to glean such a summary from the at times disjointed—at times kaleidoscopic—succession of mythic, literary and historic allusions one encounters between Chapters 2 and 17 of the book. In these chapters Graves moves back and forth, often without warning, between modern forms of scholastic reasoning (i.e. inductive and deductive) and analogical forms of reasoning, which he in turn peppers with argument developments and conclusions based upon analeptic and proleptic forms of 'creative thinking'.⁴ Due to the difficulties readers experience in discerning—often, on any given page—between scholastically 'proven' assertions *and* assertions based upon his own habitual use of forms of intuitive (poetic/creative) reasoning, the book has provided many a headache for serious scholars.

Suffice to say, that many modern scholars dismiss almost all aspects of Graves's 'tree alphabets *plus* archaic religious secrets' thesis, as summarized briefly above. Mary-Anne Constantine, in a fine essay that acknowledges the imaginative achievements of Graves whilst nevertheless pointing to the realities of both contemporary scholarly interpretations of 'The Battle of the Trees' and their implications for Graves's thesis, states:

³ *W.G.* Chapter 8: 'Hercules on the Lotus', pp. 124. In Chapter 3, pg. 56 Graves writes: 'So the *Cad Goddeau* can perhaps be explained as the expulsion of a long-established Bronze Age priesthood from the national necropolis by an alliance of agricultural tribesmen, long settled in Britain and worshippers of the Dannan god Bel, Beli, Belus or Belinus, with an invading Brythonic tribe.'

⁴ *W.G.* pg. 343: "It is not too much to say that all original discoveries and inventions and musical and poetical compositions are the result of proleptic thought—the anticipation, by means of a suspension of time, of a result that could not have been arrived at by inductive reasoning—and of what may be called analeptic thought, the recovery of lost events by the same suspension."

Graves's source text now looks decidedly precarious; and even recent translations, made with the benefit of huge advances in lexicographical research, can sometimes differ enough to affect interpretation, let alone the unscrambling and reformulating process that Graves found necessary to the construction of his 'alphabet'.⁵

At one point she also states:

The initial problem for any Celtic scholar reading *The White Goddess* is Graves's high-handed certitude in the face of a text that, at its most basic level, demands humility.⁶

However, can one be wrong about certain details of a theory whilst being right, overall, about the larger significance of hitherto ignored but significant historical and mythico-religious phenomena? I would summarise Graves's fundamental insight, as articulated in *W.G.*, as follows: 'It is necessary and useful to record, explain and perhaps reverse the deliberate suppression of hundreds of female deities from the religious mainstream of societies in Western Europe, the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East between about 1000BCE and 1200CE as a result of successive phases of social and cultural change.'

2. Three Drops from the Cauldron: From Riddling Games to a Phantasmagoric Vision Quest

... In analeptic and proleptic movement, the mind is being set free.

Yet pursuit and riddles are part of an initiation and therefore the principle of initiation defines the structure of the book. Graves's method is mainly analogical and extensive. Mythological facts and figures are tied together through the quest, which sometimes baffles the reader. Yet the maze-like aspect of the work goes deeper ...

I want to shift our analysis at this point by asking an important question. If Graves was mischievous to re-order the *Cad Goddeau* in such an unscholarly fashion, also if his theory of the two Ogham tree alphabets is deeply problematic—rendering equally problematic his argument for the concealment of an archaic religious secret linked to the Muse-Goddess in the ordering of the letters/trees of the earliest of those alphabets—do such problems destroy the important central insights of *The White Goddess*?

To answer this question, we need to assess what else readers encounter and learn as they wade through the chapters to do with the *Cad Goddeau* (Chapter 2), 'The White Goddess' (Chapter 4), the riddles of the *Hanes Taliesin* (Chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9), the side 'quest' concerning 'A Visit to Spiral Castle' (Chapter 6) and the penultimate summary sections concerning the true significance of the Battle of the Trees (i.e. Chapters 10, 11, 14 & 16)?

In the analysis that follows, I will suggest that although our rational brains are kept entertained and challenged as we read these chapters—since we are all the time attempting to assess the validity (or otherwise) of the mythological arguments Graves is articulating—something else of great importance is also happening as we're drawn ever deeper into the book's mythopoeic and historical maze. In these chapters, I would argue, Graves is

⁵ 'The Battle for the Battle of the Trees', Mary-Anne Constantine, p. 32. In *Graves and the Goddess*, Ed. Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop, 2003.

⁶ Ibid, p. 32.

surreptitiously proceeding with a concealed secondary goal of the book, for in them the ‘poet making’⁷ dimensions to the work are mischievously and relentlessly activated. The work ‘makes poets’ by subjecting readers to page after page of dense, highly numinous ‘prose-poetry’ that reminds us, at every turn, of just how ignorant of the mythopoetic history of humanity we (and therefore our teachers, parents, media experts, church leaders, etc.) have become. When he addresses poet-readers directly at the conclusion to the ‘Foreword’ he ends with the statement: ‘I do not even know that you are serious in your poetic profession’. He is, of course, issuing a profound challenge to those who would define themselves as poets. The eternal game (or ‘knowledge chase/quest’) conducted by different generations down the ages, between ‘wise and knowledgeable mentor’ and ‘keen but ignorant novice’ is amusingly announced, since he has just compared himself to a ‘brushless fox’.

As he juggles the threads of his outlandishly complex—and almost impossible to follow—historic argument, readers simultaneously find themselves absorbing, subliminally, a numinous kaleidoscope of images, stories and information to do with trees and flowers; wild and domestic (often totemic) animals; long forgotten gods and goddesses; fabulous mythological beasts; a plethora of prehistoric monuments; the bizarre actions of a colourful array of culture heroes; numerous long-forgotten seasonal festivals, rituals and ceremonies; reams of folklore; quotes and asides drawn from the ancient texts of countless traditions; and, finally, a veritable catalogue of historic events and turning points spanning thousands of years. In short, kaleidoscopic ‘visionary’ psycho-spiritual states associated with shamans, poets, mediums, mystics, etc. the world over—and most importantly, in the ancient Welsh tradition, with the initiation experiences of Taliesin and Merlin—are transmitted, in all their chaotic and unsettling vividness, to readers prepared to plough on through Graves’s ‘ocean of words and images’ as though the book’s rational argument can indeed be absorbed and understood over a few sittings—a completely impossible task, by the way.

This ‘method’ apparently provokes in many readers a gradual and unique sense of the ‘numinous’, or ‘magical’, that is quite different to experiences of the sacred one encounters in monotheistic and other transcendent traditions. Graves’s transmission of this ‘numinous epiphany’ rests on five pillars, as far as I can tell: 1) the interconnected magic of wild places, nature generally (including depictions of the behaviours etc. of beasts, birds, insects, fish and all aspects of the plant kingdom), the passage of the seasons, astronomical phenomena and ancient monuments, especially in natural places; 2) the stored magic of ancient mythologies, folk lore, legends, fairy tales, curses, charms, etc.; 3) the emotions stirred by encounters with the ‘sacred feminine’ principle, in all her wild and domestic variations; 4) the subtle embedding of a narrative (essentially ‘existentialist’ in nature) involving choosing or rejecting the path to one’s ‘authentic self’; and 5) the sense of a vast historical and cosmological narrative, or vision, unfolding across millennia that is less to do with the actions, conquests and political intrigues of ‘great people’ (i.e. rulers, warriors, etc.) and decidedly more focused on the historic evolution of religions and philosophies that we perceive as vitally relevant in some way to our own quite modern psycho-spiritual dramas and challenges. The transmission of this multi-layered epiphany—one evoking, strangely enough, a sense of ‘numinous (or magical) positivity’—to readers is, I would argue, the

⁷ Lindop Grevel’s ‘The White Goddess: Sources, Context and Meaning’ (p. 24) of in *Graves and the Goddess*, Ed. Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop, 2003, was the first critical work I encountered that suggested the possibility that this may have been a secondary goal of the book, i.e. to ‘make poets’. Regardless of whether this could be proven or refuted, the idea that poetic methodologies (and ways of thinking) alternate with scholarly methodologies (and ways of thinking) though-out *W.G.* is obvious enough, and this fact would mean that different aspects of the reader’s mind and emotions could be activated by different parts of the book.

major achievement of W.G. It is also what makes the book an ‘epic and magical prose poem’ and also one of the great literary achievements of the 20th century.

This ‘numinous epiphany’, however, unfolds in parallel with the rickety, scholastically dubious, riddling, game-like and ridiculously complex historical arguments that Graves develops in any given chapter. By the time readers encounter the culmination of the book’s central historic argument in Chapter 21—if readers have not already set the text aside due to frustration, bamboozlement or outrage—they barely know what to think, believe, etc. However, for a significant number of them there exists, quite suddenly, a renewed sense of life’s ‘magical possibilities’. By this point in the book it is barely relevant whether the historic argument stacks up or not—what matters is that the epiphanies associated with trees, wild beasts, moss-coated ruins, vast historic epochs and choosing to live an authentic life are firmly lodged in the novices’ heart and mind where they may begin to release peculiar forms of inspirational magic.

The principle used by Graves is well-known to poets and fiction writers, i.e. ‘Show don’t tell.’ For much of the book Graves drowns his more abstract arguments in a sea of natural phenomena and imagery. By way of example, I have listed below the introductory sentences Graves uses to discuss the five ‘vowel trees’ of his revived archaic ‘tree alphabet’:

The first tree is the silver-fir, a female tree with leaves closely resembling the yew’s.
The second is the furze, which with its golden flowers and prickles typifies the young Sun at the Spring equinox ...
The third tree is the heather, sacred to the Roman and Sicilian love-goddess Venus Erycina...
The fourth tree, the tree of the autumn equinox and of old age, is the shifting-leaved white poplar, or aspen, the shield-maker’s tree ...
The fifth tree is the yew, the death-tree in all European countries, sacred to Hecate in Greece and Italy. At Rome, when black bulls were sacrificed to Hecate, so that the ghosts should lap their gushing blood, they were wreathed with yews.⁸

Readers might agree that the language used here is just short of poetic, steeped as it is in vivid, concrete details. But how are we to concentrate on complex, abstract developments to the book’s main argument when we are constantly encountering such evocative and symbolically complex asides? The urge to learn by researching each reference is strong. Like Odysseus’s crew-members lolling in blissful, but forgetful, tranquility on the Isle of the Lotus-eaters, some readers—perhaps stranded but enchanted—give up entirely on tracking the difficulties of the book’s logical argument and main-chase (i.e. for the poetic truth/knowledge etc. to be found in the Muse-Goddess) and instead choose to browse (graze) upon the fabulous succession of images, symbols, natural phenomena, gods and goddesses, beasts, birds and fish, etc. that rear-up from the text, one after another, to seize the imagination.

We will end this chapter by briefly listing: a) some of the ‘numinous’ beasts, creatures, trees, plants, etc. discussed in W.G.; b) some of the magical creatures and beings that stud the narrative. Also, c) we will list some of the ancient sites, monuments and other significant natural places discussed in the book, and, finally, d) we will discuss the underlying ‘narrative arc’ of the book..

3. Shapeshifting Gods and Goddesses Behind Every Wild or Domestic Beast, Bird, Fish or Insect

⁸ W.G. Chapter 11, pp. 189-193.

The Welsh Goddess Cerridwen, a shapeshifter aspect of the ancient triple Sow Goddess of Britain, is famous in Welsh tradition for initiating, training and inspiring bards. Graves repeatedly uses aspects of the Cerridwen-Taliesin story to flesh out W.G.'s Muse-goddess narrative. I would argue that the story has even deeper significance to Graves's methodology, since it enacts by way of both Taliesin and Cerridwen's actions, a magical theme that Graves uses as a fundamental aspect of his methodology in the book. At the climax of the Romance (which Graves takes to be a genuine pagan Celtic myth remnant—though possibly somewhat corrupted), both Cerridwen, and the novice poet, Gwion-Taliesin, display a magical ability to 'shapeshift' into myriad animal, bird and fish forms after Cerridwen, in her rage (i.e. the magic brew Gwion had been stirring was meant for her own son), chases young Gwion all across the northern Welsh countryside. Gwion has been accidentally initiated into Cerridwen's 'bardic university', and thus begins to experience a psycho-spiritually destabilising influx of proleptic, analeptic and visionary knowledge and imagery, as the chase proceeds.

Graves seems to use this 'shape-shifting' aspect to Cerridwen—whom he sees, unambiguously, as a manifestation of the Muse or Triple Goddess—as a methodology to track the myriad animal, bird and fish manifestations of a range of European, southern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern 'human' deities. In the pages of W.G. we are thus asked to accept the idea that gods and goddesses shape-shift back and forth between human and other forms and that any particular name for a deity may simply be a local manifestation of a more widespread deity. Below I've listed a small sample of the plethora of numinous (sacralised) creatures we encounter on almost every page of W.G. The conditions for inclusion are that one of the following are in evidence: 1) Graves links the creature to the one of the various antique chapters of the 'single poetic theme'; 2) the creature has ancient totemic significance to certain peoples; 3) the creature was sacred to, or was an assistant of a deity, cult hero or other magical creature or being; 4) the creature is the animal form taken by an otherwise anthropomorphic deity that can shapeshift between its human *and* beast, bird, insect or fish forms; and finally 5) the creature has astronomical or seasonal associations that link it to one of the great seasonal festivals of ancient civilisations.

Bulls (King Minos, the Monotaur, Dionysus and Mithras) and cows (Pasiphae), sows (Cerridwen) and boars (Set & Finn & MacCool), bears (Arturius/Arthur), dogs/hounds (Anubis & Cerberus, also companion to Melkarth the Phoenician Hercules), ravens (Odin) and crows (Bran), ibis (Thoth), bees ('sacred to druids'), hens (as black hen 'Death Goddess') and roosters/ cocks, asses and donkeys ('the Edomite Ass-God of Dora'), robins (Robin Hood and his Merry Men), cranes (associated with writing, augury and Manannan Mac Lir, also sacred to Artemis and Athena), gulls (Leucothea = 'white gull goddess'), deer and stags (stag = Hercules), dolphins and porpoise (Poseidon and Amphitrite), eagles ('the Sun God', ancient Egypt), goats (sacred to Frigg, Freya, Holda, Aegea & Ostara), hares (sacred to Frigg, Freya, Holda, etc), hawks (Horus, Galahad and Gawain), kites (Boreas = The North Wind), lapwing ('disguise the poetic-religious secret', also assistant to Isis), leopard (Dionysus and Seshat), mares (Rhiannon, Epona & Lady Godiva) and stallions (Poseidon), nightingales (linked to Maid Marian, Robin Hood, Merlin, the Fairie Queen and the May Queen), owls (Athena, Blodeuwedd and Lilith), the panther (Dionysus), quail (resurrection bird of Melkarth 'King of the City'), salmon ('salmon of knowledge' Irish trad., also Loki), seals (Phocis/Phocus the 'Seal King', also seals were sacred to Poseidon and Amphitrite, and Peleus and Thetis), sheep and rams (Osiris = Ram-headed), the roebuck ('hide the poetic-religious secret'), adders, serpents and snakes generally (spotted serpent as 'evil twin' of the Star Child who fight each other for the love of the

Triple Goddess across the year's seasons, also: sacred to druids, especially adder eggs), swans (Irish and Scottish tales of shapeshifting Swan Maidens), wolves (Artemis, The Moon Goddess and Ceridwen, sometimes as spiritual companions), wrens ('bird of the druids and associated with the sacred oak', also King of all Birds), etc.

The following animals are also discussed—though more briefly than those listed above—in W.G., and many are linked back by Graves to the Triple Goddess and the 'single poetic theme':

Ants, barnacle goose, cats, cormorants, cuttlefish, doves, ducks, falcons, fawns, frogs, gold-crest wren, geese generally, herons, lark, lions, lynx, mice, otters, partridge, pelicans, python, the rat, rooks, snipe, scorpion, scald-crow, stork, sturgeon, swallows, thrush, toads, trout, turtle-doves, vipers, vultures, weasels, whales, wry-neck,

4. Gods and Goddesses of Trees, Shrubs and Flowers

We now need to summarise briefly the unique features of Graves's use of trees, shrubs and flowers in W.G. As with our discussion of 'numinous animals', we note that ancient 'tree lore' accounts for a significant part of the book. By reading it closely we gradually become acquainted with mythological, legendary, folk-lore related, etc. dimensions historically assigned to specific European plants. Also like the animal lore that features in W.G., the plant lore included is often linked to deities, demi-gods, cult heroes, magical creatures and beings, sacred sites and so on. Often the numinous plants we encounter are also related to old stories, myths and legends as well as to 'numinous/sacred' animals.

Though the trees that Graves discusses less often (i.e. than animals) represent shape-shifting deities, many of them are included because they are sacred to specific deities, their cults or their mythology. The list below provides a sample of the forest of 'numinous' trees and plants that Graves marshals to augment the reader's experience of reading the W.G. I will start by listing the various trees and plants of Graves's theorized 'tree alphabets', since they are so central to the book's primary narrative, before moving on to other 'numinous plants' included to illustrate other points he was making. I will not detail page numbers here, since so many of the trees feature throughout the text.

TREE ALPHABET PLANTS: Birch (tree of year's inception' and used to drive out spirit of old year), Rowan or Quicken/Quick-beam (druids used its wattles to compel demons and spirits, protection versus witches), Ash (sacred to Poseidon and Woden/Odin/Wotan, also Gwydion and Yggdrasil), Alder (sacred to Bran), Willow or Osier (sacred to Hecate, Circe, Hera and Persephone, also Moon Goddesses and 'Helicon' abode of the Nine Muses), Hawthorn or Whitethorn (sacred to Maia and the May Queen, also linked to Yspaddaden Penkawr), Oak (sacred to Zeus, Jupiter, Hercules, the Dagda, Thor and El), Holly (the Green Knight/giant, also Holly Knight acts as one of the 3 divine archetypes linked to 'single poetic theme' by Graves), Hazel (wisdom, as in 'the nine hazels of poetic art', also Mac Coll), Vine (Dionysus and Osiris), Ivy (Ivy Girl, Harvest Bride, Dionysus, Osiris, sacred, also, to Saturn), Reed (linked to Egyptian Pharaohs), Elder ('Crucifixion tree', also: the witches' tree), Silver Fir (Artemis), Furze or Gorse ('Young Sun at Spring Equinox'), Heather (Venus Erycina, Isis and Garbh Ogh and 'ageless giant'), White Poplar (linked to autumn equinox), Yew (Hecate, also linked to the *Naoise and Deirdre* story), Palm ('Tree of Life' [Babylon], sacred to Ishtar, Ashtaroth and Nejran).

The following trees are also discussed in *W.G.*, though usually with lesser degrees of botanical and mythological meticulousness. Many are linked to Graves's ideas concerning the Triple Goddess and the 'single poetic theme':

Acacia, Almond, Anemone (flower), Apple Tree (Eve, Mother of all Living and the Triple Goddess), Arbutus-tree, Aspen or White Poplar, Balsam-tree, Barley, Beans, Beech, Sloe (Blackthorn), Bog-myrtle, Bramble, Briar, Cedar, Cherry, Chestnut, Dogwood (Cornel-tree), Cowbane, Cypress, Elm, Fern, Fig, Fox-glove (flower), Gooseberry, Gorse, Hellebore (flower), Hemlock, Laurel, Linden, Meadowsweet (herb plant), Mistletoe, Mulberry, Myrtle, Olive, Parsley, Pear, Peony (flower), Persea, Pine, Plane Tree, Plum, Pomegranate, Black Poplar, Primrose, Privet, Quince, Raspberry, Rose, Rye, Sant (Wild Acacia), Sorb-Apple, Spruce, Terebinth-tree, Toadstool (fungus), Trefoil (plant), Water Elder, Woodbine (vine/climber).

5. A Cornucopia of Mythical and Magical Beasts, Creatures and Beings

Graves introduces, describes and, occasionally discusses the mythopoetic significance of various mythic and legendary creatures in almost every chapter of *W.G.*—usually methodically linking each creature back to his fundamental thesis of the conflict between patrilineal and matriarchal religious systems. He works hard to draw hundreds of European, southern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern 'magical creatures and beings' into the orbit (or overall vision) of his Triple Goddess theory. Eventually, his 'Religion of the Muse-Goddess' seems to function as a gigantic 'hyper-star' or 'black hole' exerting an irresistible gravitational pull over any and every mythopoetic motif or trope that wanders into the neighbourhood.

In *W.G.*, mythic creatures often act either as allies, cult symbols or manifestations/aspects of either the Triple Goddess or the key male mythic personages at the center of the mythic drama of the 'single poetic theme'. In other words, there may be other 'numinous entities' linked to each magical beast, and together deities, magical beasts, real beasts and ordinary plants, flowers and shrubs are held to participate in a vast and ancient 'symbol system' sacred to the Triple Goddess. Let us list some of the key 'magical/mythic creatures and beings' discussed to some depth in *W.G.*.

The Chimera (p. 11), Centaurs (p. 58), griffon-eagles (p. 243), Pegasus (p. 383), the Unicorn (pp. 255-256), the Phoenix (pp. 412-413), Hell (or Gabriel) Hounds (p. 152), the Cherubim (or 'storm-cloud angels') (p. 91), Cerberus (p. 53), the Sphinx (p. 408), the Sirens (described by Graves as 'a college of nine orgiastic moon-priestesses, attendants of an oracular island shrine') (pp. 408-410), the Nightmare or incubus (pp. 410-411), Medusa or the Gorgon (pp. 223-225), the Cyclopes (p. 103 & 121), The Three Graces or Charites (as essentially identical with the Triple Goddess) (pp. 316-317), The Nine Muses (p. 168), the Maenads (p. 40), Satyres (p. 313), The Devil (numerous references), the Minotaur (p. 211-212), mermaids (p. 153 & p. 386), The Three Norns (p. 163), Furies (p. 384), the Three Fates or the Three Grey-Ones (pp. 224-226), etc.

In the end, hundreds of these supernatural marvels from numerous religious traditions are given brief cameos in the book. We begin to suspect that though Graves's 'religion of the Goddess' gives the Triple Goddess pride of place, the number of deities, demi-gods, spirits, fabulous beasts, etc. that congregate in the vicinity of her 'supernatural court' is large and diverse. This sense of a multifaceted 'supernatural cornucopia' of the Goddess, is, I would

argue, a primary source of the book's ability to enchant readers.⁹

Graves also suggests we should take these strange creatures seriously. Such an argument, I would suggest, goes back to Aristotle's school of criticism,¹⁰ and it is a virtue of Graves's approach. The scientific mind believes, of course, that such creatures do not exist. The poetic response is simple: how does the description of any given beast make our scientist feel? Objectively real or otherwise, each creature represents a key to certain emotions and spiritual truths.

6. Towards an Enchanted Landscape: Sacred Sites in Graves's Vision

Every fiction writer knows the importance of writing interesting and vivid 'settings' into their texts and making them unforgettable to readers. Although Graves tasked himself with writing an 'academic' book about 'poetics', the poet and novelist sides to his personality assert themselves repeatedly as the book unfolds, and readers are invited to place their imaginative impressions of the various plants, animals, birds, deities, heroes, insects, fish, magical creatures etc. against well-known backdrops associated with sacred sites, ancient monuments, uncanny landscapes and seascapes, etc.. Sometimes the places that flash before us are real, other times we are invited to imagine mythic and imaginary places—Olympus, Valhalla, The Avalon, etc. Either way, we begin to wander mentally through an endless array of sacred and uncanny sites (many now in ruins), landscapes and spectacular natural settings. Here again, however, we are asked to view these sites and places through the lens of Graves's 'Triple Goddess' idea. Some of the most prominent ruins, monuments, sacred sites and natural places discussed in the book are listed below (note: I will leave it to readers to follow up these references via the W.G. index).

Avalon (Isle of Apples), Avebury, Caer Arianrhod (mythic imagining of the Corona Borealis, also called 'Spiral Castle'), Caer Gwydion (mythic imagining of the Milky Way), Caer Sidi, Delphi, Dodona, Dowth, Elysian (and Elysian fields), Forest of Brocéliande, Glastonbury (Caer Wydr), Isle of Anglesey, Jerusalem, Knowth, Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake), Mount Snowdon, Mount Olympus, New Grange (Brugh-na-Boyne), Palace of Minos (Crete), Sanctuary of the Great Gods (Samothrace), Silbury Hill, Stonehenge, Stymphalus (Arcadia) Troy, Thespieae (Shrine and polis), The White Tower (Tower Hill) and Thebes.

7. The Narrative Arc of *The White Goddess*: Poet Heroes and the Tragic Vision

We can take our analysis of the fictional and narrative elements embedded in W.G. a step further. A few scholars have noted the book's device of early on placing the reader—especially readers who believe themselves to be poets—in the role of potential 'hero', or at least 'ally' in the quest of the 'mentor' or 'senior poet-hero' to uncover a spiritual and creative secret embedded in riddles, sacred monuments and places, ancient texts, etc.. I use

⁹ Graves, op. cit. Chapter 23, 'Fabulous Beasts'. See also Harrison's collection in Chapter 5, *Prolegomena*, op. cit.

¹⁰ D.C. Feeney [pp. 25-31] writes a good summary of Classical Greek criticisms of myth in Chapter One of *The Gods In Epic*. For our purposes, Aristotle's idea that poetry is a 'telos', an 'end' or 'purpose' in itself -with its own rules—led to various ways of defending the 'lies', 'exaggerations' etc. of the poet's end product. The telos of poetry to Aristotle was 'catharsis'. The achievement of audience 'catharsis' justified all poetic lies', 'exaggerations' and divergences from reality.

the word 'quest' here quite deliberately, since it implies a search—a movement into adventure, discovery and growth, in order to recover a lost 'wholeness'—conducted across a vast 'magical landscape' fraught with allies and antagonists. A quest also implies a 'narrative story arc', 'story beats', 'protagonists' and 'antagonists', 'challenges' and 'dangers' to be overcome and so on. We are ill-prepared, as readers, for this dimension to the work, since Graves's opening chapters—which are quite scholarly in tone—primarily prepare us for the unfolding of a rational nonfiction argument.

Nevertheless, we can detect in the unfolding of the chapters of the *W.G.* a distinctive narrative arc that draws in elements of both the real world (and the real world of historic versions of myths, legends, plant and animal lore, etc.) and a strange phantasmagoric dream or fictional world. As the story begins we are informed that there is a great antagonist, or Big Bad, afoot in the world that has been many millennia in the making. We are also told that that this antagonistic force takes social and cultural forms and encompasses many of the institutions citizens interact with on an almost daily basis. The modern industrial world with its mercantile, bureaucratic, hyper-scientific, largely patrilineal and individuality-crushing priorities is rendered as the main enemy of poets and creative people generally. One can either adapt, as a poet and a person, to this 'everywhere Big Bad' and write dull, non-passionate poetry—i.e. one can 'anaesthetize' one's creativity on the way to becoming a kind of Apollonian creative (this would amount to 'refusing the heroic call to adventure') or one can follow Graves on a fabulous and probably, ultimately, doomed adventure, that is nevertheless intrinsically worthwhile, since there is, at the end (i.e. of reading the book?) the possibility of psycho-spiritual and creative rewards—i.e. inspiration, a glimpse at the fundamental truths of the world, encounters with supernatural entities (the Triple Goddess, etc.), great poems, stories, songs, etc.. We are informed that the road will be full of challenges, tests and set-backs, but that the novice poet must endure these (as the soldiers of WW1 endured the war?) and remain true to oneself (and the paradigm associated with mythopoetic patriarchy) no matter the cost, or the temptations we encounter.

We are thus drawn into an essentially tragic narrative, since unlike Campbell's 'hero'/'mono-myth' narrative structure, with its patriarchal promise of 'heroic immortality', Graves's 'quest narrative' is largely the story of a quest to recover something essential to deep living (i.e. the presence and the blessings of 'the Muse-Goddess'), that may have been lost to the reader/protagonist, and lost also to Western societies as a whole. At every turn it is suggested that the Big Bad of modern industrial society will attempt to thwart one's efforts toward creative self-realisation (by suggesting to us at every turn that we should abandon the quest and settle for a half-life of comfort, conformity and polite living), Even the Goddess, we are told, will be a tough, shapeshifting, even 'cruel' (at times) teacher, femme fatale. There is thus no guarantee that the story will end well for the protagonist-reader, and some rewards gleaned along the way may prove ephemeral and linked only to the moment to moment thrill of the quest, i.e. the achievement of having lived life—even if only briefly—to the full as an authentic human being, and possibly an authentic poet/creative. There is, then, an Arthurian, Grail-like dimension to the story Graves outlines to his readers, and this constitutes an heroic dimension to the book's central narrative.

We are talking about a classic 20th century existential story arc, since 'being true to oneself' is essentially a form of social purification involving elements of self-sacrifice.

I will not go into great depth here about this dimension to the *W.G.* but I would like to point out that the thrills of the book are linked to adventure, discovery, intellectual questing, new learning, and nonconformity/transgressiveness, etc. and are a big part of the 'magic' readers experience. Graves brings all aspects of his creative personality into play—poet, novelist, essayist/nonfiction writer, editor, mythographer, etc.—in order to assist readers to

invest in themselves as secondary protagonists on an epic journey of psycho-spiritual ‘reclamation’.

Finally, we note that the book’s ‘quest narrative’ is simultaneously a ‘visionary’ journey through uncanny other lands—supernatural lands of the imagination and myth. As with the Imrams and Echtrae—or otherworld journeys and quest stories—of ancient Celtic mythology and legend, the ‘visionary landscapes and seascapes’ over which readers pass are animated by an eerie otherworldly ‘spirituality of immanence’, and thus many recognizable creatures and landscape features—i.e. trees, birds, animals, birds, castles, lakes, wells, etc.—suddenly seem like gateways or portals to shapeshifting spiritual beings and supernatural realms of existence. The true purpose, then, of Graves’s attempted ‘re-enchantment’ of everyday phenomena, may well have been to substitute ‘de-sacralised’, ‘disenchanted’ and ‘disconnected’ memories and perceptions of every-day phenomena (i.e. as experienced in the light of monotheistic and materialist scientific reality paradigms) with ‘re-sacralised’, ‘re-enchanted’, ‘reanimated’ and ‘supernaturally connected’ versions of the same phenomena. This narrative strategy has been especially effective, I suspect, with people inhabiting Western European non-urban ecosystems.

After reading a few chapters of *W.G.* a simple walk in a forest, around a lake, or up a hill or mountain, may suddenly present to the walker a range of uncanny emotions—suggesting perhaps a certain ‘permeability’ between worlds, i.e. between the physical world and other, perhaps supernatural, realms. No owl is ever again simply an owl, and no gnarly, moss-coated ancient oak tree is ever again simply a large ‘disenchanted’ botanical specimen. Reading *W.G.* may destabilize materialistic understandings of the ‘world of things’, by imbuing formerly inanimate, disenchanted phenomena with evanescent and enchanting, almost magical, energies.

Summary

At the start of this chapter we summarized a number of academic critiques levelled at: 1) Graves’s unscrambling of the *Cad Goddeau*; 2) the existence, or not, of a number of ancient Celtic tree alphabets (as well as their relationship to Ogham); 3) the scholastic viability of linking later Welsh and Irish texts to First Millennium BCE Celtic religious matters, teachings, etc. and 4) the actual symbolic significance of Graves’s selection of ‘numinous trees’ in his theorised ‘ancient ‘religion of the Triple Goddess’. Despite acknowledging the validity of some of the critiques, it was argued that the overall thrust of Graves’s argument in *W.G.* was not entirely undermined by the scholastic problems related to certain parts of his argument.

It was then suggested that Graves was operating on a number of non-academic levels in *W.G.* and that readers cannot progress far into the book without encountering a forest, or should we say a ‘nemeton’, or ‘grove’, of trees, shrubs, vines, flowers and grasses. Likewise, numerous sacred animals, birds, fish, sea creatures and insects, as well as a bevy of mythical and magical creatures and beings constantly grace the pages of the book, and are often linked back to its controlling narrative and ideas. At times, when Graves seems to grow bored with the book’s rational and scholarly arguments, he changes topic abruptly—sometimes for a page or two, sometimes for an entire chapter. In these moments, the progress of the work’s historical argument is delayed as we are involuntarily signed up for lessons concerning ornithology, animal lore and husbandry, plant lore, ancient astronomy, etc..

The purpose in this chapter has been to demonstrate just how dense with natural and supernatural imagery the pages of *W.G.* are. The unifying narrative of history and religion that Graves develops encourages readers to imagine and then inhabit a vast, nature-based ‘symbol system’ featuring myriad interlinking mythopoeic elements—many of which are

millennia old. The realms of the 'mythopoetic imagination' Graves presents us with also feature a range of ordinary and extraordinary 'gateways' to other realms where we routinely encounter Gods, Goddesses, magical creatures and spirits of the dead.

The cumulative impact of reading *W.G.* may now be briefly summarized: 1) At some point during our first reading experience we may all but give up on trying to make logical sense out of its scholarly arguments concerning scrambled poems, ancient tree alphabets, hidden religious secrets and a proposed ancient religion of the Triple Goddess. However, 2) if we have ploughed on courageously and perhaps managed to give ourselves over to the 'visionary richness' of the text, as well as the narrative inventiveness, we might notice that we experience feelings not unlike those evoked by skilled 'nature writers', as well as by skilled authors writing in genres that seek to conjure 'awe and wonder' in their works (i.e. speculative fiction, magical realism, fantasy, SF and quantum fiction).

It is true that the great 19th century Romantic poets and fiction writers also sought to evoke 'awe' and 'wonder' (without pandering to shallow 'escapist' fantasies), but I would argue that the vastness and denseness of the vision we encounter in *W.G.* gifts readers a surprisingly revolutionary blueprint for a life based upon personal authenticity and everyday encounters with wonder and awe. It achieves these goals even as it presents an essentially tragic vision of life in the face of the many antagonistic threats posed for those living in modern societies.