

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

Copyright, Dr. Ian Irvine, 2023 (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 to the original draft have been made in order to update the general argument for a contemporary audience. This version of the work will be delivered in book instalments during 2022 and 2023 and will run to approximately 70,000 words (an increase on the work's original word count).

Conclusion: 'So Cold No Fire Can Warm it'



The image above is my own, taken at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum during a visit there in October 2023. It depicts an ancient, probably Minoan, gold signet ring, one of a sequence, found at Knossos, Crete, and features a scene from a sacred epiphany associated with, quite probably, a Minoan goddess. All quotes and extracts from texts, etc. consulted for inclusion in this work are included for the purposes of literary criticism and academic assessment of ideas and theories (as authorised by international copyright law). However, I want to encourage readers to purchase and read in full the many texts mentioned in this work.

Published by the Zoetics Institute, Bendigo, Australia.

Conclusion: 'So Cold No Fire Can Warm it'

Graves' texts *The White Goddess* and 'The Black Goddess' are not so enigmatic, frustrating and incomprehensible as they may first appear to casual readers. If we are shocked by some of Graves' contentions it should be the shock of recognition, of re-remembering. Is Graves' historical arguments surrounding a proposed primordial Celtic Tree Alphabet true? Likewise, is a religious secret (linked to the goddess) hidden in a range of old poems? Also, can we, should we, ever bring the Goddesses of myriad traditions under one schemata (i.e. as a single Goddess, or a Triple Goddess or a Pentad of Goddesses)? Our answers to these questions, and others, are somewhat irrelevant, in the end, to our appraisal of Graves' remarkable poetic. Rather, what is important is how Graves' presentation of his poetics in *T.W.G.* and elsewhere affects us and our beliefs about the history of mythology, literature, ideas, the role of poetry in society, the nature of creativity, the proper relations between the sexes, etc.. All the facts and factual words mean nothing if our world is experienced as deathly grey, and if our minds experience only abstractions and existential anxieties.

Graves' poetic has roots in various gardens, but three in particular seem most relevant: firstly, that of nineteenth century Romanticism; secondly that of Medieval Romance traditions (particularly those based upon residual pagan Celtic foundations), and finally, we note the influence of primordial and ancient Greek and Roman Animistic, Totemistic and Polytheistic traditions that saw poets/bards etc. as shamans, healers, priests and priestesses serving various deities, transpersonal soul-doctors and tribal teachers/educators.

Graves's poetic was also, no doubt, deeply influenced by both the personality and the ideas and Modernist poetic leanings of Laura Riding—though the two poets clearly took different ideological and creative directions after their split in 1939.

The works by Graves we have explored outline for readers a vast historic narrative and accompanying chronology that plots what we might term 'the Fall of the Goddess (as well as that of her religion and sacred poets)'. Out of this millennia-long narrative of decline, certain nefarious social, cultural and environmental calamities are extrapolated. Sometimes Graves distorts the overall picture he is painting by de-emphasising or omitting facts that would present us with a more scholarly picture of actual changes to the social and cultural roles granted to poets, Muses and creativity deities over the millennia. I have attempted to highlight and clarify some of the problems resulting from his occasionally cavalier approach to historical facts.

However, the revisions introduced here do not, I believe, conflict too seriously with the overall spirit of Graves' work; rather, they streamline his overall thesis and place it in closer scholastic agreement with the evidence now available concerning creative activities in actual primordial cultures. The proposed adjustments, I hope, correct some of the more obvious errors in *T.W.G.* arising out of Graves' over-reliance on Frazer, Harrison, Murray and Bachofen. The global prevalence of Graves' understanding of the 'Single Poetic Theme' has also been thoroughly explored. Emerging from this process, however, has been a somewhat more positive interpretation of core experiences linked to primordial poetic traditions—in particular Graves' interpretation of the 'Death of the Sacred King' thesis (which he placed at the centre of *T.W.G.*). Our research has uncovered alternative narratives for creatives—arising out of ancient shamanic traditions from around the world—that involve experiences of symbolic death that result in positive personal, social and spiritual outcomes. These positive transformative experiences are reported in many traditions and, very often, contribute during the initiation phase to the actually 'making' of primordial poet-shamans. Authentic poet-shamans, we discovered, were required to undergo culturally relevant death/rebirth experiences *before* they could even begin their careers i.e. *before* they were acknowledged as professionally useful to their people.

Graves argued that the source of a primordial poet's power was a faculty of sacred intuition derived from external sources (i.e. the Muse Goddess)—a source we currently deem 'supernatural'. Here Graves is more or less correct, poetry in primordial cultures is indeed based upon the manipulation of sacralised emotional energies by shamans and poet-priests/priestesses. However, as we have seen, a much larger catalogue of emotions than those emphasized in *T.W.G.* are manipulated by ancient poets.

Poetry's role in ritually deactivating and transforming (through dramatic catharsis) stored up toxic emotions, is not well-explored in *T.W.G.* As we noted in Chapters 8 and 9, primordial poets in many cultures learn to discern blocks to the flow of divine *mana* (variously named). Certain poems, chants, songs, stories and rites remove certain blocks, thus counteracting certain types of toxic emotions (as well as bringing fragmented soul elements back into the body, psyche and spirit). Poetry and music represent artistic languages of harmony and balance, both within individuals, within communities and between humanity and the transpersonal realms.

The manipulation of life-enhancing sacralised emotion through poetry, music and dance is generally under-emphasised by Graves—despite his comments, in Chapter 1 of *T.W.G.*, entitled 'Poets and Gleemen', concerning the profoundly unsettling physiological affects associated with hearing Goddess-inspired poetry. Despite his antipathy to Plato—due to the philosopher's attack on poetry and mythology, as conducted in *The Republic* and elsewhere—we noted that Graves' own attitude toward emotional catharsis triggered by music, poetry, dance, theatre, etc. remained, largely, Platonic and Christian.¹

Aristotle's theory of poetic *catharsis* (as outlined in *The Poetics*) is surely relevant to the shamanic cultures we explored in Chapters 8 and 9, though as a philosopher he evaded a divine mandate for poetry. Graves, however, did not make serious use of Aristotle's ancient and generally arts-positive perspective and consequently all but overlooked the profound cathartic/cleansing roles ascribed to music, drama and poetry in primordial and ancient Greek (and later Roman) traditions.

Hopefully, this study has given readers a deeper understanding of differences between primordial poetic experiences and modern poetic experiences. The fact that modern poems rarely manipulate emotional energies related to 'communal catharsis' or even 'sacralised celebration', is not emphasized strongly enough in *T.W.G.*—despite the fact that Graves discussed many psychological topics, as well as their possible application to literature, with psychiatrist Dr. W. H. R. Rivers (who practiced a version of Freud's earlier dream and catharsis approach to psychoanalysis with WW1 soldiers suffering from shell-shock/neurasthenia).

We might speculate that most people in modern industrial societies have little or no knowledge of the build-up of hurt, anger, frustration and sadness that can occur when emotion is repressed, rather than expressed safely in creative and ritualistic settings. Modern society encourages citizens to transcend toxic emotion rather than confront them head on. Consequently we lose access to our best possible selves.

Graves' Triple Goddess is clearly a complex, multifaceted being capable, perhaps, of transcending time and space. To adopt Jungian terminology, tentatively, for a moment, she manifests in a range of female archetypes: the Anima, *femme fatale* or young witch, the Great Mother, the Wise Old Crone, the Devouring Witch, the female Lover, the Kore, etc. According to Graves, the Triple Goddess represented the dominant religious paradigm

¹ Though he doesn't completely follow others in the Western tradition in condemning the role of music in 'rousing the passions', e.g. Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, St. Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana* (ii. 18, 28) and other members of aristocratic intellectual elites—e.g. Epicurus, Pythagoras, Nichomachus, Porphyry, etc.. Boethius, in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Penguin, Trans. V.E. Watts. 1969), pg. 36. Makes Philosophia say, at the sight of the Muses, 'Who [...] has allowed these hysterical sluts to approach this sick man's bedside?' T. H. Chadwick, in *Boethius* p. 86. also explores the tradition in question.

believed in by primordial peoples, including primordial womankind. Her emotional, ethical, legislative, psycho-sexual, creative and spiritual values, however, fell into gradual eclipse over several millennia due to the ascent of patriarchal social structures, values and customs. In these assertions, Graves is surely correct—even if the archaeological and anthropological evidence for a pure Matriarchy somewhere back in history remains in dispute. It is obvious enough that the major Monotheistic religions of the world—i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam—annihilated, or severely curtailed/suppressed, ancient traditions involving a range of female and third gender deities.

On the whole, then, Graves is correct in his critiques of transcendent masculine religious traditions—though his remnant Victorian morality, as well as, perhaps, his fears about his own sexuality, made him unable to discern between all-male patriarchal institutions and forms of authentic, loving homosexuality—he tended to incorrectly merge the two phenomena, the consequence being the addition to his poetic of a now severely dated forms of intolerance toward non-heterosexual lovers and poets. With our emphasis on alternative primordial myth narratives emphasizing catharsis and transformation—as practiced for millennia by shaman-poets of various genders and love orientations—it is hoped that the above aspects of Graves’ supposedly primordially-based poetic have been challenged.

I suspect, however, that Graves is correct when he states that patriarchal religions do not serve the poetic instinct well, since they seek to transcend the body, the passions, nature and womankind.

Graves moved well beyond the poetics of the Romantic and Neo-Romantic (Georgian) poets that had influenced him so much in his childhood and youth. For our purposes, Shelley’s famous essay ‘A Defence of Poetry’ best summarises the differences.² Shelley displayed only minimal understanding of poetry’s actual role in traditional cultures and displays only a limited understanding of the great spiritual and philosophical paradigm shifts that have fueled human social and cultural developments over the millennia. He also under-emphasised the central role of emotional catharsis and symbolic death-rebirth experiences in the ancient poetic traditions he champions. Graves, however, acknowledged a suppressed link between poetry and female deities and believed in the ‘love crisis’ experienced by many poets (at the hands of their Muses) as a source of authentic poetic inspiration. There are hints that he also saw it as a potentially transformative process (though in this area he is scant on the details). Shelley, by contrast, associated poetry with ‘beauty’ and famously declared that beauty’s ‘secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life.’³ Is ‘beauty’ basically Graves’ Muse Goddess in disguise?

This is the moment to say a little about our exploration of the ‘love mysticism’ emphasis of Graves’ poetic. Many of the issues arising out of his tendency to simplify and herd together myriad Goddess traditions from many cultures resurface in his undeclared, yet hiding in plain sight, ‘love mysticism’ poetics. In Chapter 7 we assessed the contribution of this aspect of his work to *T.W.G.* and found it fundamental. However, problematic anthropological inputs when aligned with unchallenged tendencies in how own psyche in regards to ideal love relationships for poets, saw Graves impose universalized and historically flawed personal and modern bohemian understandings of feminism, polyamory and free love on ‘primordial womankind’ and their love relationships with poet-shamans down the ages. We have challenged and reframed some of his excesses in this area. In the end, however, we concluded that for poets capable of embracing the transformative possibilities of intense but problematic love relationships, ancient myth narratives emphasizing symbolic forms of death-rebirth sequences (for poets) triggered by lovers—for Graves the Muse Goddess—do indeed offer poets both

² Shelley, ‘In Defence of Poetry’, pp. 168-85.

³ Ibid. pg. 182, lines 475-76.

inspirational and transformative possibilities. However, Graves' extreme gendering of what we might call 'the psycho-spiritual love crisis' of shaman-poets is problematic—love, I would speculate, can be transformative for poets of any gender and sexual orientation. Likewise, Graves' emphasis on a supposedly primordial tragic dimension to the Muse-Poet relationship makes this pathway to self-transformation a 'hard sell' to modern poets—to say the least—though certain poetry audiences may well relish his over-reliance on sacrificial sex-scenes more worthy of Gothic-horror movies.

Periodic Goddess culture revivals, as Graves noted, have had to combat disenchanting, and dehumanizing tendencies linked to what we might call 'the ideological children of patriarchy'—especially monotheistic and overly-rational philosophic paradigms embedded deep in our social and cultural institutions and social customs. Increasingly, material well-being (i.e. economic well-being) alone is seen as synonymous with personal, social and cultural health and progress. These same paradigms have outlawed or rubbished the age-old animistic beliefs underpinning the world-views of would-be shaman-poets. The cultural situation is now so dire, that it would be extremely difficult for modern poets and artists to negotiate the strange transpersonal visions and insights, not to mention the psycho-spiritual intensity, so central to the initiation crisis embraced by ancient poet-shamans (i.e. ego-death, otherworld journeying, spirit encounters, symbolic organ substitutions and symbolic rebirth). The cultural room for experiencing and processing successfully the psycho-spiritual challenges associated with ancient poet-shaman initiation processes grows ever narrower—though we noted several modern psychotherapies of use to novice poets (i.e. Grof's and Jung's approaches were summarized in Chapter 9).

I have suggested also that Graves' *femme fatale* figure (so central to the personality of the White Goddess figure as outlined in *T.W.G.*) can be understood as a woman lashing out at the excesses of either her patriarchal family or the patriarchal society generally (whether the patriarchy takes a religious form or a secular atheistic form). Graves himself, eventually understood the differences between this figure and more diverse ancient Goddess archetypes—but only after several personal experiences involving 'Muses' displaying very modern *femme fatale* traits. We must not over-emphasise the *femme fatale*'s role in primordial goddess-positive traditions, even if Graves' own obsession with this figure—both in *T.W.G.* and in his own life—invite us to.

Ultimately, *T.W.G.* advocates for the revival of a global 'primordial religion' overseen by a multi-dimensional female divine figure. Poets and other creatives are encouraged to sign up for this religions and commit to living lives capable of producing 'authentic poetry' (as well as art, generally). This is an opportune moment to quote J. M. Cohen's comments about Graves in his work *Robert Graves*:

He has always been on the side of the Old gods, in whose realm he believed the springs of poetry to lie. What they bring is a complete reversal of values.⁴

As with many of the great creative breakthroughs of human cultural history, Graves and Riding (as well as their fellow Modernist poets and writers) helped move social and cultural mores some distance beyond the remnant Victorian morality that had overshadowed their formative years. However, progress in changing ingrained social and cultural habits peacefully is usually slow and most of the key Modernist figures never completely escaped their upbringings (as Graves himself acknowledged when he described relatively late personal experiences of sexual liberation).

Shelley wrote of the capacity of authentic poetry to 'subdue to union irreconcilable things' to 'marry exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change.'⁵ Emily

⁴ Cohen, *Robert Graves*, pg. 19.

⁵ Shelley, 'In Defence of Poetry'. p. 182, (lines 469-71).

Dickinson also articulated the feelings poetry—though admittedly she was writing about book poetry—should evoke in audiences. She describes a state close to what the Haitians called ‘The White Darkness’:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm it, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?⁶

Graves’ unique and eccentric poetic surely went some way toward reinstating some of the ancient uncanniness, magic, awe, dread and enchantment associated with authentic poetic and musical experiences. Whether attempts in this study to reinstate still more elements of the primordial poetic experience to the modern cultural mainstream succeeds is a matter for emerging and established poets and readers.

⁶ Emily Dickinson in *The Unreluctant Years*, by L. H. Smith. pg. 107, Penguin. 1976.