The White Goddess: Presence and Power in the Poetry of Robert Graves

Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas and other scholars believe that cults of an all-powerful Great Goddess endured for more than 30,000 years, from the Near East to Northwestern Europe and other parts of the ancient world. The ancients knew the Goddess as Isis in Egypt, Inanna in Sumer, Demeter in Greece, and centuries later, as Cerridwen in Celtic Britain. But twentieth-century English-Irish poet Robert Graves knew her as the White Goddess from both Greek myth and Celtic legend. She became a powerful presence in his life and work.

Just as prehistoric cultures regarded the Great Goddess as the source of life, death, and rebirth, Graves—on his discovery of the White Goddess during his scholarly research for a historical novel in 1944—recognized her as the life force in his own poetry, namely the Muse. Whether she manifested herself in his creative colleague and lover, the American poet Laura Riding, or in the moon rising over the hills of the island of Majorca—his home from 1929 on—the White Goddess was a consciously real presence and generative force in his writing. At his death in December 1985 at the age of ninety, Graves left a prolific testament to the White Goddess’ power in his life and art; he authored more than 130 volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, criticism, and lectures.

Of the White Goddess’ preeminence in Graves’ work, critic Douglas Day wrote, “For eighteen years she has, in all her manifestations, been his poetic inspiration” (Contemporary Literary Criticism 1:127). But Graves ultimately realized that she was the inspiration for most of his life work. He wrote for her and about her. She became an obsession, the inspiration and subject of many poems, including “The White Goddess,” and his much-discussed prose work of poetic myth, The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth (1948). She was the tour de force of his creative life, at least, after discovering her in 1944.

Graves believed that the White Goddess actually existed every bit as much as Neolithic worshippers believed that the Great Goddess dwelt in the megalithic temples of Malta or the shrines of Catal Huyuk in Asia Minor. She was more than an historical or mythological figure unearthed by archaeologists or by Graves’ own classical scholarship. She was a recurring presence in his life, and “his study of the Triple Goddess [Maiden, Mother, Crone], the ancient Mediterranean deity gave him a ‘unifying vision’; i.e., a universal view which shaped his work life (Day, CLC 1:127).

Ironically, Graves’ research as a novelist led him to his poetic truth and the White Goddess or Mother-Muse. While at Galmpton, England, during World War II, he was reading classical mythology and legend in order to write his historical novel, Hercules, My Shipmate (1945), which depicts “a world in which the power of the Goddess is waning” (Canary 98). On retracing the journey of Jason and the Argonauts, he noted that Goddess worship was prevalent throughout the ancient Mediterranean world in many cults. The Goddess was already familiar, at least, intellectually to Graves, the classical scholar, from the Homeric epics, Sir James Frazer’s The Golden Bough, Apuleius’ The Golden Ass, and the anthropological findings of Jane Harrison and J.J. Bachofen (Day, “Coming” 44). Still the unexpected epiphany of the White Goddess during his research into Greek mythology for his novel is somewhat puzzling, but intriguing. According to Graves’ own account, one morning he was charting the mythical Jason’s route on a map when he stopped to think about a Welsh poem, “The Battle of the Trees.” Later, when he turned to that particular Welsh verse, while working on The White Goddess, he recalled reading “The Battle of the Trees” as a boy living in Wales (30). The White Goddess had also shown up in the narrative of Hercules.

Curiously, Graves never tells exactly how or why he made the leap from the Mediterranean world of classical Greek mythology to sixth-century Celtic Britain and Welsh verse that morning, except to say that “a sudden overwhelming obsession interrupted me. It took the form of an unsolicited enlightenment on a subject I knew almost nothing of...” (Day, “Coming” 46). Graves recalled that he was reading The Mabinogion, a book of Welsh legends, when he discovered that by using clues from “The Battle of the Trees,” he could solve a medieval riddle in “The Song of Taliesin,” a minstrel poem “which had always been dismissed as deliberate nonsense” (On Poetry 228). The Mabinogion, which contained “The Song of Taliesin,” referred him to “The Battle of the Trees” whereupon he went to his Irish grandfather’s books of ancient Celtic literature and “came up with the ‘facts’ that supported his intuition” (Day, “Coming” 47). The answer to the Taliesin riddle was in the letter-names of a secret, ancient Druidic alphabet contained in “The Battle of the Trees,” which fit “The Song of Taliesin” with “almost frightening exactitude...” (Graves, On Poetry 229). Therefore, keeping alphabets secret as in the poemotion-riddles was probably important to the priesthood’s wishing to control learning. Such priesthoods “worshipped respectively the Goddess Danu (the Celtic version of the Egyptian God Bel),” Danu worship in Britain dating back to the Bronze Age (Day, “Coming” 47). With “The Battle of the Trees,” a Latin alphabet (Boibel-Loth), displaced
the earlier, secret Celtic alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion, also known as the Birch-Rowan-Ash whose first letters of tree names formed a sequence or alphabet. Graves knew that the Neolithic Great Goddess was also symbolized by the tree. And the eighteen-letter tree alphabet also served as a sacred calendar, which Graves says

can be proved, by a study of the festal use of trees throughout Europe...observed in the Bronze Age...from Palestine to Ireland, and to have been associated everywhere with the worship of the pre-Aryan Triple Moon-Goddess—sometimes called Leucothea, the White Goddess (On Poetry 229).

Graves concludes that the two minstrel poems, with their rhythms of the alphabets, represent the struggle between the matriarchy and the patriarchy and the eventual suppression of Goddess worship. Connecting the Goddess with these ancient alphabets, Graves traced her cults throughout Europe. The Great Goddess was the same no matter what she was named. However, he found the Goddess of Poetry to be the Triple Moon Goddess, Brigit of Ireland and Scotland, and he linked Cerridwen of Wales to the Ninefold Muse-Goddess in Greece.

In his research, Graves had “stumbled on the secret of neolithic and Bronze Age religious faith” (On Poetry 230), understanding many myths and religious practices much better as a result. More importantly, however, he realized that the imagery of the romantic poets “is drawn either consciously or unconsciously from the cult of the White Goddess...” (Graves, On Poetry 230). He also realized that the Apollo cult, which rejected the Celtic alphabet for the Phoenician alphabet, had suppressed the cult of the Lunar Mother-Goddess in the second century B.C. Similarly, Christians displaced the Muse-goddess Cerridwen and her poet-magicians in Wales in the sixth century. Finally, learning about the suppression of the Goddess led him to differentiate between Muse-inspired poetry and Apollonian poetry, the product of the intellect.

Whether Graves discovered the White Goddess by serendipity in his literary research or he found him, as his allusion to occult coincidences suggests, is a moot question and matters less than the bountiful inspiration and energy he bestowed on him from then on. The “mysterious enlightenment” began with the minstrel poems (Day, “Coming” 46); his book The White Goddess was the result of that sudden inspiration. As he recalls,

...my mind worked at such a furious rate all night, as well as all the next day, that my pen found it difficult to keep pace with the flow of thought... within three weeks, I had written a 70,000-word book about the ancient Mediterranean Moon-Goddess whom Homer invoked in the Iliad ...and to whom most traditional poets ever since have paid at any rate lip service. (Day, “Coming” 46)

What Graves really discovered was the intrinsic relationship between the language of the poet, which is myth, and the worship of the Moon-Goddess (the Muse). Poetry was “rooted in some sort of magic,” whose principles were a religious secret which was at “last garbled, discredited, and forgotten” (The White Goddess 17). Thus Graves believed that the poet, if inspired by the Muse, has access to and preserves this ancient secret knowledge.

The two minstrel poems, which Graves explored in detail in The White Goddess, contain the secret rudiments of ancient poetic language once associated with the Goddess:

...the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-Goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and...remains the language of true poetry—'true' in the nostalgic sense of 'the unimprovable original, not a synthetist substitute.' (9-10)

As societies changed from a matriarchal to a patriarchal order after Central Asians invaded Mediterranean lands from 1500 B.C. on, so did language and myths until the magic of poetry died with Greek logic and rational language honoring Apollo (Graves, WG 10). “The ancient language survived purely enough in the Mystery-cults of Eleusius...in the poetic colleges of Ireland and Wales and in the witch-covens of Western Europe” because Christianity had also suppressed the Goddess cults (Graves, WG 12).

The purpose of the riddles, using the tree alphabets in the medieval Welsh poems, according to Graves, may also have been to keep the name of the Great Goddess from the Christian church which feared her because she “embodies the mysteries of fertility and generation and demands man’s ‘spiritual and sexual homage’...” (Vickery, The White Goddess and King Jesus” 92). Graves linked the original poetic language of myth with seasons and vegetation since people celebrated the Goddess as the source of life and fertility. In matriarchal societies, priests and priestesses used mythological language to invoke the Great Goddess or Muse. Graves, therefore, asserts that “religious invocation” of the Muse is the “true function of poetry;” hence, “true poetry sprung from matriarchal society...” (Seymour-Smith, CLC 1:128).

The heart of Graves’ fervent poetic faith, which he professed in The White Goddess and other writings, is that “all true poetry is both inspired by and a celebration of the White Goddess. The White Goddess is both the Muse and the archetypal Woman...” (Spears, CLC 11:255). Graves believed that true poetry comes from the Muse, who is the White Goddess, and insisted that “no poet is a true poet until he devotes himself utterly to the expression of his love for her” (Day, “Coming” 52). The poem itself is the
result of the poet’s encounter with or possession by the Muse:

Since the Muse can be known only as she is incarnate in a particular woman, clearly this is the story of a love affair with a real woman; but equally clearly it is both the record and the product of a love affair with the Muse. The poems themselves are testimony and fruit of an encounter with the Muse, and the story they tell is that of every poet’s love for her latest mortal incarnation. (Spears, CLC 11:256)

For Graves, the one major theme of poetry is the love a poet has for the Muse (or a man for a woman) which is represented in “...the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year...” (Jarrell, Third Book of Criticism 95). Each time he wrote a poem, Graves saw himself reenacting this ancient myth in which the Year God sacrificed himself to the Great Goddess to ensure a successful crop. As many times as he fell in love or was Muse-possessed, Graves went through this life-and-death cycle:

On the level of myth, the Sacred King is ‘the Moon-Goddess’s divine victim,’ and ‘every Muse-poet must, in a sense, die for the Goddess whom he adores, just as the King died’ (Keane 175). The poet accepts his own death at the hands of his Muse so that “a new and better creature—an eternal being, a poem—may be born” (Vickery, Robert Graves and The White Goddess xi). The White Goddess then is both creator and destroyer, one to be adored and feared, and “the true poet, Graves insisted, must be literally in love with [her], in a succession of human incarnations...” (Adcock, CLC 39:328).

One significant embodiment of the Muse for Graves was American poet Laura Riding, who, on arriving in England in 1926, became his lover and literary colleague and, according to Randall Jarrell, “quite possibly the most important single element in his poetic career” (CLC 1:127). T. S. Matthews attributes Graves’ “mystical and reverent attitude toward [sic] the mother goddess” to Riding (Gurgian 231), and Jarrell, a strong admirer of Graves, says, “All that is finally important to Graves is condensed in the one figure of the Mother-Mistress-Muse, she who creates, nourishes, seduces, destroys...” (Third Book of Criticism 111). After Riding rejected him in 1939, Graves was able to see “the archetypal pattern of inspiration, love and ultimate destructiveness he later associated with the Triple Muse” (Keane 173). Whatever guise the Muse appeared in—and Graves loved many women in his lifetime—she was always the White Goddess, imbued with the “ancient power of fright and lust...whose embrace is death” (Keane 175).

The Muse was already operative in Robert Graves’ life before he identified her as the White Goddess, borrowing from Greek and Welsh myth, or recognized her in the women he loved. In Welsh mythology (Romance of Taliesin), she is Olwen, the lily-white May Queen, or Cerridwen, the fearsome white sow-goddess (Day, “Coming” 48). In The White Goddess, Graves explained that wen stands for “white” and eerdd in Irish and Welsh for “gain” and also “the inspired arts, especially poetry” and that “Cerridwen is clearly the White Sow, the Barley-goddess, the White Lady of Death and Inspiration” (67-68). Also, her whiteness refers to the color of the moon in its first phase before it turns red or black, signifying the Triple Moon-Goddess. “The most comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature,” according to Graves, “is contained in Apuleius’ The Golden Ass...” (WG 70). Despite Graves’ sudden awareness and allegiance to the White Goddess, arguing that she is the timeless and traditional figure of the Muse (Seymour-Smith, CLC 1:128). Graves knew that the White Goddess as Muse is a universal visitant.

On the other hand, Graves’ personal identification with the White Goddess seemed to have made her an even more compelling force in his life, solidifying his dogma that only “real” poetry comes from the Muse. If “poetry [had] been his ruling passion” since he was 15 (WG 17), he must have considered the White Goddess the elemental source of that passion. “The White Goddess caught and held Graves’ imagination as nothing else had been able to do...” (Day, CLC 1:127). Muse-inspired poetry is real, Graves claimed, because it is written in a trance—at least the beginning of a poem—although a trance is usually brief. To the Muse, Graves ascribes “magical inspiration” (Day, CLC 1:127) and spontaneity, which he deemed prerequisites of poetry. He could also say, with considerable authority, that “...the love bestowed on the poet, however briefly, by a Muse-possessed woman, heightens his creative powers to an unparalleled degree” (Harte 5:8:470).

Naturally, Graves considered himself a true poet, a poet of passion, unlike the Apollonian poets of the modern genre who are ruled by the god of reason and who write by conscious design rather than by inspiration or from the unconscious. He criticized his contemporaries who, because they did not devote themselves to the White Goddess, wrote the “artificial, uninspired poetry of classicism” (Day, “Coming” 52). Graves eschewed literary fashion and divorced himself from modern life even at his island habitat on Majorca, reflecting his view that true poets do not thrive in patriarchal society because it values logic, rhetoric, and intellect. One major difference between Muse (true) poetry and Apollonian poetry is that “[C]lassical poetry never makes the hair rise and the heart leap...and this is because of the difference between the attitudes of the Classical poet, and of the true poet, to the White Goddess” (Graves, WG 25). Among the few he
honored for having written true poetry were Shakespeare, John Skelton, John Keats, John Donne, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Graves disputed critics who equated the true poet with the Romantic poet, however, describing "the typical poet of the nineteenth century [as]...physically degenerate..." or ill or addicted to drugs (WG 25). Not all Romantic poets were true poets because they did not all write for a muse, according to Graves (Day, “Coming” 50).

Critics agree that Robert Graves' poetry flowered after his discovery of the White Goddess in 1944 whether they accept—or even understand—his complex hybrid of Greek and Celtic myth and poetic theory in The White Goddess, which he finished on his return to Majorca after the war in 1946. "Whatever Graves 'really' believed about the goddess...what matters is the artistic use to which the theories were put" (Keane 178). By her divine inspiration, he became a love poet, and "in the opinion of many critics, his love poems were the finest written in English in the 20th century, apart from those of W.B. Yeats" (Saxon 321).

Graves continued to write poetry into his seventies, turning to a "more kindly muse" in the Black Goddess who rendered him a deeper wisdom and provided a burst of "color and vitality" in his work (Keane 178). His later poems of the 1960s "express a transcendental love that, predicated in pain and despair, culminates in elevated awareness" (Marowski 45:161). With the Black Goddess, Graves' vision became "Love as 'perfect now'...(Riley 1:129), bringing him a tranquility heretofore missing in his White Goddess worship.

With each decade, Graves received more and more critical acclaim so that by his death in 1985 the accolades were many. According to critic Peter Davison, Graves was "more purely poet than anyone else alive...no one lived more singlemindedly and passionately for his art or more concertedly against the current of fashion and critical dogma" (Remnick 39:326). Graves' contemporary and fellow English poet, Stephen Spender offered:

I think that a great deal of his poetry is very beautiful and that he was a wonderful, a miraculously poet at his best—very pure and quite unlike anyone else. (39:327)

American poet and critic Randall Jarrell cited "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" as "one of the most beautiful poems of the century" (CLC 1:126) and has said that Graves' White Goddess poems are his "richest, most moving and most beautiful poems" (Robert Graves 17). Among his achievements as a major English poet was his election to the Oxford Chair of Poetry, 1961-66, during which time he visited his homeland briefly to deliver his Oxford Addresses on several occasions.

In the closing lines of The White Goddess, Graves averred that he was not the prophet of the Goddess and simply praised her as "none greater in the universe" (492), the true source of his creative power. The White Goddess was more than a powerful muse, however. Through his in-depth study of the White Goddess and her counterparts in classical myth and legend, Graves understood the roots of patriarchy and the long human history that has suppressed feminine wisdom. In the chapter, "Return of the Goddess," Graves anticipates a call for actual Goddess worship following a period of political and religious disorder (WG 485). Jungian analyst Edward C. Whitmont predicts:

A meaningful new orientation to the secrets of existence is arising from the very depths of the psyche from which religions are born. It stresses the feminine, earthly, instinctual, and sensual aspects. The cultural development of the West has consistently controlled, repressed and denied these through the last five thousand years. Their disregard threatens to unleash untold violence and destruction. (33)

A man who lived close to the earth, Graves had already connected environmental degradation to scientific materialism and industrialism when he wrote The White Goddess in the mid-Forties. Given the current Gaia consciousness and ecofeminism, which regard the Earth as a living organism—for which the Goddess, source of fertility, is an apt image—Graves was a soer. Though unorthodox at times, his insights derive from his classical and biblical scholarship. He saw the consequences of continued suppression of the Goddess:

But the longer her hour is postponed, and therefore the more exhausted by man’s irreligious improvidence the natural resources of the soil and sea become, the less merciful will her five-fold mask be, and the narrower the scope of action that she grants to whichever demigod she chooses to take as her temporary consort in godhead. (WG 486)

The prose and poetry of Robert Graves are rich sources of Goddess wisdom for those already celebrating her return.
Works Cited


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