

Thesis
3259

UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

ROBERT A. DAVIS

The Origin, Evolution, and Function of the Myth of The
White Goddess in the Writings of Robert Graves

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 1987

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The Origin, Evolution and Function of the Myth of the White Goddess

In the Writings of Robert Graves by Robert A. Davis

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Abstract of Thesis

This is a study of the development of the myth of the White Goddess in the work of Robert Graves, a subject related to the wider field of the place of myth in modern culture.

It begins by looking at the conditions which promoted Graves' interest in myth, principally his experience of the Great War. The responses of other writers are examined to provide a context for understanding Graves' transition from Georgianism to myth, as reflected in his early poetry, autobiography and writings on psychology.

Before looking at how Graves' myth was formed, the history of the concept of myth is examined, from primitive peoples to civilized religion. Focus is centred upon the dual tendency of myth to reinforce and to undermine authority. Some of the figures behind Graves' interest in myth and anthropology are subject to scrutiny.

An account of the relations between myth, literature and psychology permits the survey of Graves' gradual transition from psychological theory to mythographic speculation. The gradual emergence in his poetry of devotion to a Love Goddess can also be traced.

Detailed interpretation of The White Goddess, its arguments and procedures, brings to light Graves' theories of the single poetic theme and the primitive matriarchy, both of which can then be evaluated and set in the context of his dedication to non-rational forms of thought.

This leads into a close reading of Graves' major mythological poems, followed by reflections upon the myth's application in his critical writings and cultural commentaries.

Finally, consideration is given to Graves' later writings, especially his attraction to Orphism and the adoption of mythic personae in his verse. The influence of the Black Goddess of Wisdom over these later works is interpreted and assessed.

Acknowledgements

My debts are many, and I am aware that they can be paid only in the inadequate currency of acknowledgements. My scholarship, and my whole approach, have been shaped decisively by my supervisor, Alasdair Macrae. His advice and counsel have been of limitless value to me; his example, as critic and teacher, has been even more important. He took some half-formed ideas, moulded them, purged them of many impurities, and then, at the appropriate moment, set me to turn them into a finished and coherent argument. For any remaining shortcomings, or infelicities of style, the responsibility is entirely mine.

In addition to Mr Macrae, I learned much from proximity to a distinguished department of scholars and teachers at the University of Stirling over the period of my four years of full-time study. I must single out Michael Alexander, now Professor of English at the University of St Andrews, and thank him for several interesting conversations on myth. I must also express my thanks to John Drakakis, in particular for the valuable postgraduate seminars on literary theory which he organized in sessions 83/84 and 84/85 and from which I learned a great deal. Thanks are also due to Dr Donald Low who encouraged me from my earliest days at Stirling.

Much of the research for this thesis was conducted against a background of contracting university resources and an ominous change in the intellectual climate affecting advanced study in the arts. Despite sometimes difficult circumstances, I found the departmental administration and the library staff to be tireless in their efforts to assist me. I must thank Mr Gordon Peacock and Mr Douglas Mack for their prompt response to my requests, and also for providing me with access to the special holdings on Robert Graves.

A lot of my work was done in, and between, cities other than Stirling. Thanks is due to my alma mater, the University of Strathclyde, in particular to Dr Andrew Noble, whose evening classes on modern literature gave me an opportunity to test some of my views on Robert Graves before a captive audience. I must also thank Hamish Good of the Andersonian Library for helping me trace materials on mycology. Dr Nicholas Wyatt of the Religious Studies Department at Glasgow University gave me valuable bearings in the study of shamanism, the goddess-cults of the Near East, and on several additional anthropological puzzles which arose from time to time.

My studies in anthropology were facilitated by a period of research at the University of Cambridge during session 82/83. The rigours of solitary enquiry were much eased by the cooperation of Dr Eric Griffiths, Michael Preece, Michael Laszlo, Rachel Kennedy and Theresa Rogers.

I was fortunate, whilst an undergraduate, to be introduced to Rev. Frank Foxon, around whom gathered a small group of students meeting informally to discuss literature, art, religion, and politics. Between 1977 and 1983 I amassed a large debt to the Woodlands group, and our many discussions, in the appropriate and authentically-preserved surroundings of an old Swedenborgian library, did much to influence the direction of my work. Among the several friends who shared that time with me, I must express my gratitude to John Wilson, for our many conversations on Modernism, and also to Leslie Crook, whose recall of the poetry of Robert Graves I have found to be unmatched.

Other friends from academic and non-academic life have been sources of encouragement to me. I must thank my brother Paul for a number of useful comments on Nietzsche and the irrational. I must thank my parents, who have always supported my academic endeavours materially and morally. Without them this thesis would not have been completed. Mary and Jim McGonigal, themselves no strangers to the demands of academic research, gave me rich advice on how to create a structure for my arguments.

I should also like to thank the following friends and associates for their support over several years: Bob Eccles OP, Raymond and Mary Taylor, Scott Ramsay, Judith Watkin, Rev Ray Vincent, Andy Vaughan, Dr Greg Murphy, Rev Jim Wallace, Robin MacGregor, Dr Ken Gelder, Ibrahim Tamallah, Caroline Dale, Anne Rennie.

My greatest single debt is to my wife, Ann. She not only typed this thesis, but has lived with it, through pregnancy and motherhood, as kind of 'third party' for the seven years of our marriage. My debt to her is beyond expressing, and I can only say to her, with Graves' "Man Does, Woman Is" - though I know she would disagree.

RAD November 1987

A Note on the Text

All quotations from Graves' poetry are taken from Collected Poems (1978), a reprint of Collected Poems 1975 (1975), unless the poem in question has been discarded or revised, in which case reference is made to its original publication. See also bibliography.

For Rev Frank Foxon,

Who first introduced me to the works of Robert Graves

Introduction

This study of certain aspects of Robert Graves' poetry and prose grew out of an interest in the relationship between myth and modern literature. While many able academics have explored the part played by myth in the achievements of High Modernism, less attention has been paid to the workings of the mythopoeic mode in the writings of those artists traditionally assigned to the fringes of Modernism. This particular region of twentieth-century English literature is populated by an unlikely assortment of writers who, in their lifetimes, were sufficiently idiosyncratic to resist posthumous inclusion in the ranks of Modernism, yet who shared in, and deepened, the rediscovery of the expressive powers of myth. I would include in this little-known band difficult writers such as Charles Williams, David Jones, John Cowper Powys and Vernon Watkins. Yet it was, perhaps, the traditionalism of these writers which, in their own times, distanced them from the experimentalism of their Modernist contemporaries, and which continues to shroud their achievements in obscurity. The blend of myth and traditionalism is, as I hope to show, an uneasy one, and those who attempt it resist easy categorisation in the accepted groupings of modern literature.

Robert Graves the poet is most popularly known as a writer of love-lyrics: poetry which suggests a passionate but disciplined intelligence, shy of romantic intensities; poetry delivered in a controlled, urbane, deliberately understated, register; preferring conversational style to the rhetorical flourish; observing with wry humour the ironies of desire in order to justify the occasional celebration of love's victories. This popular image of Robert Graves and his work, fostered in large part by the anthologies in which his verse so frequently appears, is not wrong, but it has always struck me as inadequate.

Discerning readers who have forged more deeply than the

anthologies usually become aware of other, darker features of Graves' work lurking beneath the polished surface - war, for example, or deep emotional pain. Some venture as far as to perceive dimly the shadow of a vast, implacable female presence slumbering behind the poetry, and loosely associated with a strong thread of mythological allusion running through it. But few journey further into the labyrinth. After all, there is no need to. The poetry does not seem to demand it in the way that, for example, "The Waste Land" does, or The Anathemata. Somehow, the traditional lyric form and the 'universal' themes combine to forestall further scrutiny of the popular image.

Yet, for the intrigued, the dissatisfied, those determined enough to go searching, there gradually emerges a series of problems, problems which ally Robert Graves, in some respects, with the enigmatic figures listed above. For a large part of his long and very productive career, Graves stressed that his work was motivated by an archaic mythological story, a narrative he labelled "the single poetic theme", and which connected his voluminous outpourings of love lyrics with a primordial and savage ritual, engraved on the human psyche, and originating in the darkest, most remote epochs of our history. This archetypal narrative lies, Graves argued, at the heart of human identity, where our religious, artistic and sexual instincts converge: a primal scene where love and violence, consummation and destruction, become indistinguishable and are joyously affirmed; a layer of unconscious feeling borne in the minds of men and women everywhere, to be activated, perhaps, by personal trauma or cultural disaffection. This mythological 'event horizon' is, Graves went on to claim - astonishingly - the foundation of heterosexual love.

This study tries to treat these claims seriously. I am concerned to look for the roots of Graves' mythological beliefs in his early life and writings, and to subject them to scrutiny as they change

and develop through his work. I concentrate less, then, upon the 'popular' Graves, and the scores of finely-crafted lyrics of which he is author, and more upon the evolution of certain key themes in his poetry. I am particularly interested in the various psychological and cultural pressures under which Graves' recourse to myth was formed, and how these pressures gradually gave rise to a series of prose speculations, culminating in the vast mythographic undertakings of The White Goddess and its associated works. Hence, the thematic focus of this study is quite narrow, embracing comparatively few of Graves' huge collection of writings, but it is, I hope, deep in its analysis of the genesis and growth of the various themes.

The subject of myth looms large in contemporary critical and cultural theory. It finds itself drawn uncomfortably into current debates on the precise ontology of the 'text'. Robert Graves was a writer obsessed by 'texts', and the beliefs from which his personal mythology was created emerged, in the first place, from a complex interaction of texts, and texts-within-texts, which continued to shape his work to the very end of his career.

In keeping with my decision to analyse Graves' mythology in its own terms, I begin with an investigation of the historical, biographical and literary conditions which provided the point of departure for his gradual shift towards the language and vocabulary of myth. Rather than offer inadequate definitions of the term 'myth', definitions which my subsequent readings of Graves' work would in all probability render spurious, I attempt in my second chapter what I have termed a 'natural history of mythology'. My justifications for this procedure are manifold, and several of them become evident as the study of Graves proceeds.

I deemed it useless to present definitions of myth the only effect of which would be to circumscribe my subsequent explorations. However,

I felt it necessary to do something no previous commentator had attempted, and try to show how concepts of myth and the mythological had evolved in Western thought through the ages, my purpose being to show how several of these concepts become active once again in the work of Robert Graves. This account of myth avoids becoming a mere survey adjacent to the examination of Graves because I have concentrated on bringing out certain specific properties of what I have termed 'the paradox of myth', which may then be seen to shed light on the seemingly contradictory and ambivalent aspects of Graves' creative achievement.

Many of the problems which readers encounter with the work of Robert Graves are, it seems to me, directly connected with the contradictory properties of myth, properties extending back through the treatment of myth by our forebears. They are also problems attributable, I think, to the troubled historical conditions which have provided the context for our modern 'rediscovery' of myth, and which have a direct bearing upon the project of Robert Graves. There are things about the nature of myth itself, I contend, which invite an ambivalent response, and this response may be seen repeating itself throughout the natural history of mythology.

I am, of course, indebted to the vocabulary of philosophical anthropology throughout this study, though not, I trust, to the point of obstructing the non-specialist. Part of the intention of Chapter 2 is to summarise the part played by the novel science of anthropology in shaping the modern conception of myth and ritual. 'Anthropologies' of several different sorts are employed to further understanding of the 'magical' bent of Robert Graves' writings, and to test the central hypotheses of the single poetic theme. Graves' own aims and techniques as a mythographer are also investigated.

At the heart of this study is a lengthy assessment of the poetry

written by Robert Graves in connection with his vision of the Triple Muse. This includes poetry which documents his commitment to the ideals of the pastoral mode, particularly in response to his experience of war, and poetry which anticipates his dedication to the White Goddess. I am especially interested in the 'mythological' poems which expound the doctrines of the theme, and through which the evolution of Graves' identity as a poet may be traced. A large portion of my work is devoted to exploring the latter, little-known, stages of this evolution, as Graves drew closer to a kind of shamanistic Orphism, itself profoundly intertwined with the paradoxes of myth, and presided over by the enigmatic presence of the Black Goddess of Wisdom.

It is my contention that the myth of the Great Goddess is central rather than peripheral to any judgement of Graves' contribution to modern English literature. The large body of love lyrics upon which his current fame rests has to be set within the context of the single poetic theme, its engagement with history, and its dramatically unorthodox and challenging account of human nature. The process of understanding the achievement of Robert Graves is only now beginning. I hope this study of one of its most significant leitmotifs goes some way to furthering that process.

Chapter 1: War, Personality and the Conditions of Myth

Arms and the Poet

The pattern of a highly self-conscious and varied literary career must always be examined against an historical background even as the effects of the shaping forces within it are being understood. From the collision of individual awareness and the tensions of the age there arose in the mind of Robert Graves, in response to the crisis of 1914-18, an obsession with poetry as a form of understanding inalienably at odds with the prevailing ethos of industrial society. The roots of that obsession run deep into the paradoxes of a pre-War English culture fraught with doubt and self-criticism, and menaced by the twin spectres of economic decline and increasing militarism. Poetry was originally for Graves, by his own admission, a means of escape from these oppressive forces!¹ It swiftly became, however, an instrument for challenging the cultural order from which they had arisen, reaching back towards the identification of some moment of catastrophe; reaching forward in gestures representative of a looked-for restoration.

One of the central issues with which this chapter will deal is the difficult and baffling relationship which exists in the work of Robert Graves between his inner biography and his emergent understanding of the part played by the historical process in structuring that inner life. The crucible of this understanding was without doubt Graves' experience of the First World War, the impact of which was to shape decisively his artistic career, fulfilling many of the nightmare elements of his childhood experiences, and confronting him with what was to remain one of the overriding concerns of his work: the assimilation of suffering to the process of artistic creation.

Humanist criticism has traditionally embraced the poets of the First World War as, in Donald Davie's words, "first hand and faithful witnesses to a moment in the national destiny."² The pioneer anthologists of the 1960s³ who reached out to the newly receptive and youthful audiences in the schools and universities, flush with the anti-war sentiment of Suez and Vietnam, did much to create an orthodoxy of literary history which has only recently been questioned.

No presentation of the writing of a particular period is value-free, and the issue is a particularly vexed one where purely aesthetic criteria sit uncomfortably close to matters of war and peace, commitment and pacifism. For Jon Silkin, the last apologist for Great War poetry to restate the radical objectives of the sixties' anthologists prior to a major retrenchment in English national life, the question of canonicity is inescapably political:

The problem is circular...The poems were of worth for their independent responsiveness; but they were concerned with values which many would consider crucial, and in considering these values one had not to lose sight of how the poems themselves kept contact with the experiences they in varying degrees imaginatively recreated.⁴

Of few other literary movements or periods would the process of selection become so explicitly moral! Yet whether we approve of this method or not, we cannot remain blind to the problems with which it confronts readers of war poetry without marginalising what I shall propose are vitally important elements in the generation of that poetry.

Vulnerable points in the argument of the 'polemical' approach have recently come in for considerable attack from equally polemical historians and literary critics who sense a shift in the nation's response to its military past.⁵ Such controversy serves to highlight the diff-

iculties which inevitably arise when attempts are made to produce an integrated tradition of war poetry answerable to the needs of a period of national re-examination. The poetry of the First World War is peculiarly susceptible to this kind of controversy because all sides agree that it stands at a watershed in English culture. The poetry is so enmeshed in a network of extra-literary concerns thrown up by the decline of Britain as a Great Power that it is extremely difficult to retrieve it for the exploration of issues of text and genre.

What I am arguing is that, regardless of the 'school' to which readers belong, the struggle to possess Great War poetry for a particular interpretation of English history has tended to obscure deeper questions of mode and meaning, in the solutions to which a clearer understanding of the poetry's cultural context may actually be achieved. Disputes about who to include or exclude from the canon, about particular writers' attitudes to war, and, most persistently, about whether or not "the war was a journey from innocence to protest",⁶ prevent us from reading more deeply into the pattern of the verse, and the individual and cultural pressures which created it.

For example, Silkin's selection from Graves' three wartime collections, Over the Brazier (1916), Goliath and David (1916), and Fairies and Fusiliers (1918),⁷ offers us a Graves who is in a distinctly anti-pastoralist mode, rejecting the consolations of the blue remembered hills of pre-War England:

Why should I keep him time?
 Why in this cold and rime,
 Where even to dream is pain?
 No, Robert, there's no reason:
 Cherries are out of season,
 Ice grips at branch and root,

And singing birds are mute.⁸

("To Robert Nichols")

Yet to dwell exclusively on this aspect of Graves' war poetry, albeit in the interests of an overall persuasive scheme of which this is but an element, is to silence the voice of pastoral escapism which is a prominent feature of the same group of poems.

The intentions of the war poets have come to us, as I have suggested, mediated by interests alert to the ways in which the verse can be used to construct a picture of war. In 1914 the Government propaganda machine made serious efforts to conscript poetry to the military endeavour as a means of mediating the experience of war in an appropriate fashion to the reading public.⁹ Since then, a problem of singular complexity has been the fact that the best work of the war poets embodies in its rhetorical structure specific contradictions in relation to the experience of war which prevent easy categorization. Critics of Robert Graves have concurred that he is in some sense an anti-war poet, but there are features of his early poetry which awkwardly resist that description, and they have left his critics foundering.¹⁰ Part of the problem is, surely, that much of the poetry of the Great War bears an ambivalent relationship to the conflict from which it emerged.

Those war poets who have been accorded major status - principally Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Thomas and Jones - exhibit and wrestle with these contradictions in some of their best work. More painfully than any of the others, Owen sought quite deliberately to set aside the categories of art and genre which, he thought, might obstruct the realism of his intentions and weaken the sentiments he desired to transmit:

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is

not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War and the pity of War.

The poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They might be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn.

That is why true Poets must be truthful.¹¹

The persuasive purpose of Owen's Preface is clear. It might stand as a Preface for much of the war poetry, including Graves'. But its stated aim of undermining the conventional outlook which keeps soldiers fighting has to be interpreted primarily in literary terms. It is an error to smuggle into our reading of the war poets an assumption that their work is somehow a transparent medium for conveying the experience of war. Owen's Preface demands that we read his work specifically against the received topoi of the epic: heroes, glory, honour, might, dominion, power. He disavows epic in an attempt to wrench war away from the context it has come to occupy in our culture by virtue of the values inscribed upon it by the language of epic. Having detached war from the associations with epic action, having rejected the allure of epic diction, the next step is to relocate it in a new order of discourse, characterised by pity and reproach, and embodied in the favourite Great War genre, the pastoral elegy. The same purpose, though in a more inchoate form, may be discerned in Graves' war poetry.

At its highest level, the practice of debunking received notions of combat became, for the war poets, an heuristic one. Traditional images of war had become enshrined in a highly-wrought literary language with a pedigree reaching back to Homer. Dismantling the rhetoric involved, as Owen knew, developing a repertory of equally literary devices designed to contrast conventional expectation with a shocking,

though no less factitious, 'reality'. Chief among the devices used to construct this reality was irony; an irony which dealt with contrast and incongruity. It placed expectation alongside actuality and exploited the dissimilarity for moral effect. Though diametrically opposed in terms of their persuasive purposes, both expectation and reality were essentially literary constructions, drawing heavily on artifice and figuration; the one using the topoi of epic poetry, the other seeking to counteract it with pastoral elegiacs, irony, parody, naturalism.

In every way, then, the work of the poets of the Great War is irreversibly caught up in a contest of discursive practices, a battle between rival accounts of the same experience. Even the apparent triumph of a particular canon of poems at this point in time is a fact of literary history which is both accidental and temporary. Moreover, the creation of that canon has disguised an essential feature of the poems themselves, one which is central to their continuing significance. For there exists in much of the literature of the Great War an implied intertextuality which generates much of its meaning, its irony and its polemical thrust.

Owen realises many of the aims of his strongly didactic Preface through just such an intertextual engagement with the epic topoi he is seeking to dismantle. The most celebrated instance of this occurs in the challenge of "Dulce Et Decorum Est" to the theme of patriotic self-sacrifice:

My friend you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.¹²

Pace the Preface, the central concerns of this poem are poetry, the relations between poetry and life, and, most profoundly, the relations

between texts. Allusion to the Horatian Ode serves to juxtapose the two poems in the mind of the reader in the belief that the contrast will awaken the characteristic Owenite emotion of "pity", regarded as an antidote to the sentiments stirred by epic diction.

This basic strategy, an intertextual engagement with the literary conventions surrounding war and soldiering, is a powerful feature of much of Owen's later poetry. Classical, and even more markedly, Biblical allusions allow for the development of a serious interrogation of the tradition of martial literature which constituted so significant a backdrop to the conditioning of young, middle-class Englishmen for war. "Arms and the Boy", "Sweet is your antique body", "At a Calvary near the Ancre", "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", "Strange Meeting", in various ways take to task the received heritage of martial images in order to discredit the distorted understanding of war it has helped to shape. Reader response is carefully manipulated to react to the contrast between the conventional and the actual, between received fictions and contemporary realities.

Robert Graves' reaction to the war takes a similar direction, and, if we are to interpret it as the seminal phase of his writing, we are best to describe it as accurately as we can against that literary background. Throughout the war, Graves was very much aware of belonging to a group of soldier-poets with whom he shared and debated the place of poetry within their experience of warfare.¹³

For all of these men, even those with whom Graves was not personally acquainted, the problem of their relationship to a literary tradition quickened much of their writing. "'Will Captain Croesus come this way?'" an embittered Sassoon could ask, recasting the Lydian hero as a limbless veteran robbed of his antique dignity ("Arms and the Man"). The tableau of the Crucifixion and the Gospel accounts of the Passion provided him with another text in friction with which

his irony could flare ("Christ and the Soldier", "Golgotha").¹⁴ For Rosenberg the Jew, Old Testament themes of martial prowess and the military triumph of God's chosen people jarred painfully with the senselessness of trench warfare which produced no victors ("The Destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Hordes"), affirming the need for a transformation of the structures of power (Moses).¹⁵ The self-divided Thomas could seek through his verse to affiliate his personal experience of war to a transcendent and anonymous fraternity of warriors, uniting the combatants of "the Crusades/Or Caesar's battles" with the men of the Western Front in a totality ("The Sun Used to Shine"). More emphatically than for any of the others, for Thomas the subjective experience of war is but another text laid over deposits of past wars which have been lost as everything but traces in the historical record "Of Blenheim, Ramilles, and Malplaquet" ("Digging"), and recoverable only through an act of the imagination which overcomes separation in time and space.¹⁶

This transcendental function, which we shall again encounter in Graves' work, brings us to the poetry of David Jones, where the intertextual question becomes most problematic. Jones' work is a deliberate palimpsest of what he called "association-perceptions".¹⁷ Primarily in In Parenthesis, but also throughout his work, a tissue of reference and allusion binds the subjective experience of a single soldier to an overarching fabric of martial tradition wrought from Welsh folklore, Malory, the Mass, the Old Testament and Norse mythology. Despite his stated preference for writing "about a good kind of peace",¹⁸ and despite the sustained passages of the poetry in which a naturalistic account of trench warfare is depicted, the intertextual strategy of In Parenthesis succeeds best at accomodating the realities of the Great War to a romanticized tradition of heroic action. In the celebrated Taliesin section,¹⁹ the Welsh Private, Dai, identifies himself

with a mystical cadre of warriors drawn from history and legend, membership of which confers a special meaning and dignity on his own exertions:

My fathers were with the Black Prince of Wales
 at the passion of
 the blind Bohemian king...
 I was with Abel when his brother found him
 under the green tree...
 I was the spear in Balin's hand
 that made waste King Pellam's land.²⁰

Jones felt the spiritual outrage of trench warfare as keenly as any of his contemporaries. John Ball, the Everyman hero of In Parenthesis, rages against the pointlessness of the slaughter with an exasperation surpassed only by Sassoon. However, we cannot escape the conclusion that the raised diction of the poem makes of his diurnal sufferings something edifying, because aesthetically meaningful.

This is the trap which seems to spring on the bulk of the work of the war poets. The intertextual features of their writing betray a dependence upon the literary tradition. This threatens to rob the writing of its cutting edge because it allows for the recuperation of their critique by the culture against whose institutions and authority it was originally directed. A liberal, pluralistic culture simply places war poetry within the chronology of the tradition, highlights its consanguinity with the literature of the past, and can soon promote it as just another set of conventional responses to war.

The complicity of much of the poetry of the Great War in a cultural order it has ostensibly repudiated lies at the heart of the controversies surrounding its current reception. But it also points directly to the equivocation dramatised by the writers themselves, none less so than Robert Graves. We shall see that in Graves' work myth is the saving trope by which the poet dissents from the 'official' culture out of which his poetry is derived without severing the poetry's

strong organic links with the pre-scientific religious, artistic and philosophic sources of that culture.

The process of mythologising personal experience began early in Graves' work. If we are concerned with the transactions between poetry and history, with the complex lattice of conditioning, and expectations, compromises, disappointments, losses and gains which affiliate the writer to his environment and his times, then we are obliged to redefine the relationship between text and context, the synchronic moment of the poem and the diachronic continuum of its surrounding history. An examination of Graves' early career can enlarge this synchronic moment almost as one might progressively enlarge an aerial photograph, seeking finer and finer detail.

A crisis in European imperialism; a technological war waged between the mightiest nations on earth; the Somme affair; destined to be known among its combatants as "The Great Fuck-Up", and the largest engagement fought since the beginnings of civilization. The 20th of July 1916, an action in the area around Mametz Wood on the Givenchy sector of the battlefield; in an incident during one of the many muddled attacks that morning a young man of twenty is blown up by an eight-inch shell:

One piece of shell went through my left thigh,
high up, near the groin; I must have been at the
full stretch of my stride to escape emasculation.
The wound over the eye was made by a little chip
of marble...This, and a finger-wound which split
the bone, probably came from another shell burst-
ing in front of me. But a piece of shell had also
gone in two inches below the point of my right
shoulder-blade and came out through my chest two
inches above the right nipple.²¹

Two days later his parents receive a telegram informing them that their son is dead, and the next day, on what would have been his twenty-first birthday, his obituary appears in The Times.

In a war so rich in ironic emblems that it sometimes appears to lack verisimilitude, Graves' experience is actually only one of many incidents charged with symbolic content. Yet it remains, in many respects, the single most significant event of his literary career, evolving in his thought and in his poetic self-dramatisations into a complete narrative of death and resurrection. The disordered state of communications between France and England ensured that several days elapsed before his parents could be informed of the error that had been made, by which time he had shown signs of recovery. Reflecting some months afterwards on that intervening period, Graves could claim in the poem "Escape", "...But I was dead, an hour or more...

Oh, may Heaven bless
 Dear Lady Proserpine, who saw me wake,
 And stooping over me, for Henna's sake
 Cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back...22

These words mark the commencement in Graves' verse of an elaborate practice of retroactive reasoning by which past experiences are interpreted according to the principles of an hermeneutic established much later: a mythic narrative, perhaps, or a quest romance, which confers meaning, and organizes the otherwise random elements of a lifetime into coherent patterns. Many years later, when in his writings he had already played through the avatars of Dionysus and Hercules, and Proserpina was understood as an aspect of the Triple Goddess, Graves was to complete the equation of biographical incident with myth by declaring:

Fortune enrolled me among the second-fated
 Who have read their own obituaries in The Times,
 Have heard 'Where, death, thy sting? Where grave
 thy victory?'
 Intoned with unction over their still clay...
 And learned to scorn your factitious universe
 Ruled by the death which we had flouted.

("The Second-Fated")²³

The implications of this episode in Graves' career may be measured by the extent to which he later exploited its reserves of symbolic reference. Clearly it was instrumental in consolidating his attitude to the war. But it also provided a central metaphor in defining his privileged status as a poet, and in expressing his relationship to the world around him acquired by virtue of that status. The Second-Fated are an elite corps of individuals who have, in some sense, 'died' to this world and risen to an improved and cleansed perception which sets them apart from their fellow creatures. If this sense of rebirth into a heightened awareness freed from the contingencies which shape the lives of ordinary men and women lies close to Graves' concept of the poet, and if it in part explains his subsequent flight from the modern age, then it challenges us to discover what, precisely, he died to, and to what form of life he arose.

Early Responses

His wartime experiences crystallized tendencies in Graves' nature which owe their origin to a particularly complex interaction of conditioning and environment. Several critics, including his two biographers, have dwelt in some detail upon the family influences which had such a direct impact on Graves' early development.²⁴ Less attention has been paid to the contemporary circumstances then affecting the class into which the Graves household had ascended.

Occupying a secure social position acquired as much by merit as heredity, the Graves family appeared to bask in the sunset glow of Victorian prosperity, their security strengthened by membership of the new professional elite created by the expansion of a centrally administered state and a growing imperial bureaucracy. Wealth and ability protected them from the recessions of the 1880s and '90s which buffeted their class, ensuring that Robert was born into domestic stability

and plenty.

Alfred Percival Graves, a more sophisticated character than his son's pen portraits suggest, was a scion of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy; a liberal whose literary accomplishments were modest without being dilettantish. His interest in the Celtic Revival, particularly the upsurge of research in folklore, was more than passing, leading to Robert's first acquaintance, through his father's large library, with antiquarian learning.²⁵ But the intellectual milieu to which Alfred Percival belonged was not immune to the changes then sweeping English life. Shifts in the balance of economic power, and deteriorating international relations undermined the fabric of liberalism by threatening some of its principal mainstays: free trade, isolationism and the progressive extension of Irish independence. It was the increasingly uncertain future of the Anglo-Irish elite that prompted Alfred Percival to remove his family from Ireland to London, where, in 1894, he found employment as a schools inspector.

Like many members of the intelligentsia, Alfred Percival sheltered from the upheavals of the time in literary and scholarly pursuits which helped him spin a protective cocoon around his domestic life impervious to the deteriorating economic and political situation outside. The most tangible consequence of this for the young Robert was that literature imprinted on his mind categories for both self-understanding and comprehension of the world at large. He recorded this curious experience in the very early "The Poet in the Nursery".²⁶

It is an artificial recreation of the moment of poetic awakening, but its reflection upon the relationship between mind and texts makes this poem an interesting insight into the construction of Graves' outlook. Casting himself in the role of "the young poet", Graves moves cautiously across a space that is both nursery and library, aware only of one other human presence, a composite poet-father figure

"Pulling his long white beard and gently grumbling/That rhymes were troublesome things and never there." Surrounded by texts that both invite and intimidate, Graves' initial sense of wonder is soon seen to conceal an ambivalence towards language which combines fascination with apprehension: "...funny muddling mazes,/Each rounded off into a lovely song." Even the purely formal qualities of verse give rise to coercive similes of domination: "...rhymes like a slave-driver's thong,/And metre twisting like a chain of daisies." The room is the scene of a struggle for the possession of "monstrous phrases" from which the nascent poet emerges with a qualified victory. He can "gloat" over his command of language, represented by his taking possession of a book of poetry, but by this action he has released into the nursery "Wonderful words no one could understand." The act of appropriating the text leaves an excess of meaning which eludes possession.

Isolation in an infantile realm where the governing principle seems to be the pleasure of the text, and which is guarded by a father assiduously devoted to a system of liberal values he scarcely admitted were under attack, was to prove an inadequate training for the opening decades of the 20th-century. Critics agree that it was the job of Amalia Elizabeth Graves, the poet's mother, to prepare her son to take his place in society.²⁷

Amalia, an altogether more profound influence on Robert, was a daughter of the great Von Ranke family. Her uncle was the legendary historian Leopold Von Ranke. She brought into Robert's life a combination of austere Lutheran piety and an aristocratic intellectualism which placed first emphasis on integrity and a scrupulous attention to the details of personal conduct. Her fidelity to truth-telling regardless of the cost, and the diligence with which she encouraged her children to distance themselves from anything that might compromise

their honesty were matched only by her devotion to duty, her insistence that every responsibility had to be met. The tension between two contrary imperatives which she bequeathed to Robert only became evident when he confronted issues where his sense of honesty demanded one thing, and his sense of duty quite another, and where the dilemma left him mistrusting everything but the most interior of his intuitions.²⁸

The full anxiety of this relationship asserted itself at a period in Graves' adolescence when it could merge almost imperceptibly with guilt-feelings coming from a number of different areas in his life. But it is perhaps to be heard distinctly in what Seymour-Smith describes as Graves' first poem:

I sat in my chamber yesternight,
 I lit the lamp, I drew the blind
 And I took my pen in hand to write;
 But the boisterous winds had rent the blind
 And you were peeping from behind -
 Peeping Tom in the skies afar,
 Bold, inquisitive, impudent star!²⁹

Amalia's influence came to be internalised as a censor brooding over the moral perils of the poet's imaginative freedom. It was to prove a powerful feature of Graves' later neuroses. The stern, prudish aspects Graves came to identify with the Germanic connection, towards which, once again, he experienced ambivalent feelings. Childhood visits to Germany awoke a deep-seated pride in the aristocratic legacy of his forebears, in the ease with which they exercised power and led intellectual endeavour. He entered Charterhouse proud enough of the 'Von Ranke' in his pedigree to use it in his signature and laugh off the taunts of other boys. But in this insouciance his father's disregard for the world beyond the Celtic Twilight and his mother's moral impassivity had done Robert no favours.³⁰

The painful contradictions of trench warfare were foreshadowed for Graves in the nightmare of his public school education at Charterhouse, where the subtle violence of class, militarism and repressed sexual feeling first impinged on his adolescent mind. He found in the corrupt structure of the school hierarchy rehearsals for the hideous conflict which would decimate a whole generation of young men of promise, among them his own teachers and closest friends. He heard the inflexions of 1914 take shape in the language and rhetoric of his peers, obscure signs of a European imperialism turning self-devouringly inwards.

Innocently proud of his German blood, he soon fell victim to the rampant anti-German feeling which stalked Britain in the years of the arms race and the Kaiser's gun-boat diplomacy. "'German,'" he wrote, "meant 'dirty German'...

It meant 'cheap, shoddy goods competing with our sterling industries.' It also meant military menace, Prussianism, useless philosophy, tedious scholarship, loving music and sabre rattling.³¹

His persecution at the hands of the sons of the landed gentry; boys of a class fond of flexing its superiority over the parvenu intelligentsia, marked Graves indelibly, and left him with an implacable hatred of aristocratic mores and jingoism. It was a hatred that was to solidify into despair when he went to war and saw how this same class so grossly mismanaged the campaigns and led thousands of soldiers to useless deaths.

Despite his misfortunes, however, Graves did not entirely reject public school life. Charterhouse was where he made his first true friendships; it was where he first discovered the 'Great Tradition', albeit independent of the teaching system; it was where he succeeded in winning his self-respect by devising a strategy for survival which ratified the codes of the school hierarchy at least as much as it

dissented from them. When feigning madness failed to win him the privacy he so desperately needed, Graves defeated his persecutors in the time-honoured fashion beloved of schoolboy romance: he took the leading bully into the boxing ring and gave him a whipping. So the narrative of Goodbye To All That records the first in a series of compacts with that which Graves purports to repudiate,³² and highlights a characteristic and recurring feature of his poetic stance: his ambivalence towards those elements in the dominant culture which, he insists, are fundamentally at odds with the poetic vocation.

The reading and writing of poetry became a means of sublimating his divided feelings. "Since the age of fifteen poetry has been my ruling passion," he would write later,³³ pointing back towards the phase of his Charterhouse schooling when he began to develop his protest against the cultural heritage offered him by upbringing and education. His isolation led him to read haphazardly through the volumes of English poetry. Although he loved reading poetry, 'literature' was too closely identified in his mind with the oppressive school regime for him to feel entirely at home with the English classics. In consequence, he read and composed poetry far removed from mainstream literature, the most eccentric of which was the Welsh verse form Cynganedd. Some englyn from the period were preserved as late as the 1938 collection:

Thou, a poor woman's fairing - white heather,
Witherest from the ending
Of summer's bliss to the sting
Of winter's grey beginning...³⁴

A lifelong suspicion of the Great Tradition was laid down on the bedrock of Graves' native contumacy by these formative experiments:

I now delight
In spite
Of the might

And the right
 Of the classic tradition,
 In writing
 And reciting
 Straight ahead
 ("Free Verse")³⁵

The ironies of an adolescent protest inextricably snagged in the semantics of its own environment are betrayed even here, in similes which inadvertently comply with the prejudices of his schoolfellows: "My rhymes no longer shall stand arrayed/Like Prussian soldiers on parade." It was to take a more radical departure from the conventions of his class for Graves to establish a reasonably secure ground from which to address his criticism of the heritage he was here questioning. But already we can see a social dislocation reflected in a cultural alienation which will only grow more pronounced as the years go by. The individual talent here swerves away from the "might is right" logic of "the classic tradition", finding its own voice in the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.

Literary precedent is found for this swerve in the work of another self-conscious eccentric hovering on the fringes of the tradition who becomes for Graves at this stage a kind of chosen precursor: John Skelton. The poem "John Skelton", itself written in 'skeltonics', the favoured stress-syllable metre of the Tudor poet, celebrates Skelton's idiosyncrasy, his distance from literary orthodoxy, which Graves takes to be a hallmark of real literary accomplishment:

Helter-skelter John
 Rhymes serenely on,
 As English poets should.
 Old John you do me good!³⁶

Emphasis is placed on Skelton's remoteness from the classic tradition by an act of contrast: "He was no monstrous Milton." Apart from passing a judgement on him which Graves will amplify in his later

work, Milton is cited as a representative of the orthodoxy with which the young Graves was increasingly discontented because of its affinity with the oppressive educational system. Skelton stands outside that, his life and work sufficiently unorthodox to make him a useful model for the aspiring Graves. The debt to Skelton is overstated in Poetic Unreason (1925) where Graves claimed that he was "a stronger influence on my work than any other poet alive or dead... in choice of metre and handling of words particularly."³⁷ But the mature Graves could lay claim to Skelton as a prime example of "The Dedicated Poet", insisting of his work "No more direct and sincere love poems had yet been written in English."³⁸ The consistency of his argument is a consequence of Graves building a romantic mythology of love, complete with the vast machinery of The White Goddess, from materials which originated in his early experiences.

The choice of a response that is only partly reconciled to the dominant culture invited marginalisation. His parents encouraged Graves "to endure" his unhappiness,³⁹ thereby laying the basis for a strong belief in the virtue of such endurance. This was compounded by the more insidious influences which implicated Graves in his surroundings and which he was taught to internalise. The sexual mores of Charterhouse, and the religious convictions of his mother were imprinted so indelibly that to react against them was guaranteed to induce crisis. Repelled by the quasi-homosexual sentiment which in those days did much to fortify public school solidarity, Graves came to regard his increasing isolation with a religious fastidiousness. He became obsessed with maintaining a Christ-like purity of flesh designed to avert the lewdness of the other boys, and when he found himself involved in a relationship with a classmate which was itself frankly homoerotic, he levelled all his self-disgust at his own body.

This is to summarise a very complex process of repression and sublimation, amply detailed by his biographers,⁴⁰ but, in adopting a puritan, almost ascetic suspicion of the physical body, Graves created a problem which it was to take all the resources of his romantic mythology of love to solve. The difficulties translated themselves into his schoolboy verse as a clearly neurotic revulsion at the thought of physical sex:

Down dirty streets in stench and smoke
 The pale townsfolk
 Crawl and kiss and cuddle,
 In doorways hug and huddle;
 Loutish he
 And sluttish she
 In loathsome love together press
 And unbelievable ugliness.
 These spiders spin a loathly woof!
 I walk aloof,
 Head burning and heart snarling,
 Tread feverish quick;
 My love is sick;
 Far away lives my darling.
 ("Oh and Oh")⁴¹

Far away indeed. Schoolboy Graves was to go to war a virgin and a prude as much as he did a rebel, his asceticism reinforced by a distorted picture of himself as a scape-goat victim heaped with the sins of lust and concupiscence, confirmed in a life of penitential self-inflicted punishment, a poor unsung imitator of Christ in a wilderness exile from the commerce of his fellow men:

And ever with him went,
 Of all His wanderings
 Comrade, with ragged coat,
 Gaunt ribs-poor innocent-
 Bleeding foot, burning throat,
 The guileless old scape-goat;
 For forty nights and days
 Followed in Jesus' ways,
 Sure guard behind him kept,
 Tears like a lover wept.
 ("In The Wilderness")⁴²

Notions of exile, vicarious suffering, the pull of the wilderness,

and comradeship in adversity were to be reinforced by the war, emerging as themes central to the myth of the White Goddess.

The Georgian Background

At first sight, the concerns of Georgian poetry seem remote from the experience of Graves' early life and poetry, still more so from the myth he was to go on to develop in his subsequent writing. But since it was the only literary movement to which he ever belonged, and was the most active source of poetic ideas in the decade of the First World War, it is important for us to look afresh at some of the salient features of Georgian verse. We can begin with Graves' own summary, often regarded as the last word on Georgianism.

Georgianism was an English dead movement contemporary with Imagism and politically affiliated with the then dominant Liberal party... The Georgians' general recommendations were the discarding of archaistic diction... and of pomposities generally. It was also understood that, in reaction to Victorianism, their verse should avoid all formally religious, philosophical, or improving themes; and all sad, wicked cafe-table themes in reaction to the nineties... Eventually Georgianism became principally concerned with Nature, and love and leisure and old age and childhood and animals and sleep and similar uncontroversial subjects.⁴³

The pursuit of "uncontroversial subjects" in an era of upheaval soon became a politically charged endeavour. The ascendancy of "the then dominant Liberal party", whose connections with Georgianism Graves shrewdly observes, was being steadily eroded by a Conservatism revived by the influence of anxious businessmen in flight from foreign threats to British capital and the domestic reforms of Asquith's government. Edward Marsh, editor of the Georgian anthologies and sponsor of Graves' inclusion in the volumes, hobnobbed freely with the powerful families who made up the ruling Liberal elite. He saw himself as an arbiter of national taste and as an innovator in English

literary values. The reforming zeal of the 1906-14 Liberal administrations was directed against the edifice of Victorian social and foreign policy, and Marsh and his socialist partner in the Georgian project, Rupert Brooke, "believed that Victorianism in literature was gone for good and that a new era had begun."⁴⁴

The new era brought with it difficulties which had begun to emerge in the closing decades of the 19th-century and which were at last starting to creep into the nation's literary culture. Britain's prosperity had rested upon a ruthless process of rapid urbanisation which peaked just before 1914. The abandoned and depressed countryside fell into the hands of the great landed magnates who controlled the Conservative Party and the House of Lords, where they threatened to obstruct the Liberal reforms. Urban life was characterised for many by squalor and disease. Rural life was trodden under by market forces serving the interests of magnates and developers. Something of the human cost to the countryside of this economic slump can be heard in James Stephens' lament:

I listened to a man and he
Had no word to say to me:
Then unto a stone I bowed,
And it spoke to me aloud.⁴⁵

Their involvement with the Liberal establishment, championing many of the philosophical values for which it stood, lent to the Georgians a degree of respectability which the next generation was to despise. But the Modernist reaction to Georgianism, typified by Eliot's condemnation of their unremitting "pleasantness",⁴⁶ tended to misrepresent their aims and intentions, which is ironic, if not unsurprising, coming from a movement which carried many intellectuals into the embrace of Fascism.

Robert H. Ross has tried to stress that in both its diction and its

thematic content, Georgian poetry was a revolution in English letters.⁴⁷ It is easy to misunderstand what he means by this because our literary history has been so heavily influenced by Modernist poetics which identified Georgian poetry with everything that was moribund in early 20th-century verse. Moreover, there are powerful continuities between Georgianism and the literary activity which preceded it, but they are not uncritical continuities. Rather, they represent a serious attempt to revive deep-rooted and vital well-springs of English verse which the Georgians felt were needed to minister to contemporary ailments. Hence D. H. Lawrence could become an early member of the circle:

The essence of poetry with us in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is a stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere.⁴⁸

Philosophically inspired by the realism of Russell and Moore, the Georgians set out to rescue English poetry from the imperialist rhetoric of Newbolt and Watson without succumbing to the languors of the 'nineties avant-garde. Instead, they looked for inspiration to the narrative poets of the same period, such as Masefield and Bridges, though their fear of Victorian rhetoric and 'high' diction led them to eschew the long adventure poems of their elders in favour of the short lyric. Marsh's editorial principles were simple, and they are ably summarised by Ross.⁴⁹ Marsh went for directness of statement, the cultivation of a conversational idiom, an urbane response to the emotions, a low-key register, and a careful observation of the natural world. The tendency was towards economy of expression, and in that sense it was conservative, but C. K. Stead is correct to remind us that the contributors to Marsh's 1912 volume were "generally regarded as revolutionaries."⁵⁰

The Georgian initiative must be seen against the background of the crisis overtaking English society at the time. Robert Wohl has tried to show us that the very idea of a revolution among the young can be traced to the generation of 1914.⁵¹ At the time, Georgian radicals like Lascelles Abercrombie could maintain that poetry was "experience simply as such, valued for its own sake without reference to any judgement as to its truth or reality or moral goodness";⁵² even the socialist Brooke could write:

Let us beware of those who talk of "the art of the people," or of "expressing the soul of the Community." ...the main business of art has been, is, and, one must assume, will be an individual and unique affair.⁵³

Such untrammelled aestheticism ignored the extent to which the central concerns of Georgianism touched upon the fears and anxieties of the English middle classes, particularly those who sustained the beleaguered Liberal elite in power. Even the poets themselves were astonished at the sales achieved by each of the volumes, "by present-day standards, immense."⁵⁴ An educated reading public perturbed by the dizzyingly accelerating pace of modern life, worried by a worsening economic situation, and sincerely troubled by the press barons' ability to stir the masses up to an imperialistic fervour took to the anthologies with an enthusiasm which bewildered Marsh.

His movement took on an oppositional cast because it offered itself as a repository of values felt to be increasingly menaced by the growth of an advanced capitalist democracy. Its realism was rooted in a ruralist tradition which went back through Jefferies and Clare to the peasant poets of the 18th-century who had felt the first encroachments of enclosure and the approach of the industrial revolution. Its closely-observed love of nature became a vehicle for reaction against the pace of urbanisation. Hence the emphasis on seasonal

change and on the disclosure of personality through attachment to the natural world:

O, years and tides and leagues and all their billows
Can alter not man's knowledge of men's hearts -
While trees and rocks and clouds include our being.⁵⁵

The heavily accented pastoral note in much of the Georgians' poetry accounted for a great deal of its appeal. The pastoral, later to prove such a potent element in Graves' mythology, signalled a rejection of the dehumanizing aspects of urban living. Brooke could describe the urban masses as "beasts" reduced to animality by their appalling conditions:

Come away! Come away!
Ye are sober and dull through the common day
But now it is night!⁵⁶

Yet implied in his description was a recognition that the system of production had created these distortions, beyond which organized labour possessed untold power: "Ye are men no longer, but less and more,/Beast and God..." Pastoral withdrawal past the urban confines, where "the city ends sheer/...To the level waters, quiet and clear" would restore a recognizably full humanity. The Georgians restated this theme again and again as part of an implied critique of the excesses of the economic order. Moreover, their love of the countryside did not blind them to the economic relations prevailing there: "Everywhere, the languid perfumes of corruption," wrote Thomas,⁵⁷ and the poetry is full of scattered references to abandoned farms, deserted villages and the impoverished conditions of the rural poor.

Georgianism, almost by virtue of its conservatism, its deep roots in the ruralist impulse of English poetry, articulated a low-key yet deeply felt opposition to the advance of the second industrial revolution and its attendant social upheavals. Technological changes

fed by a growing and international military-industrial base brought enormous material benefits to the middle-class in the opening decade of the 20th-century. But the menace to their spiritual lives led many educated people into ruralist nostalgia and a devotion to what they perceived to be rustic patterns of living. As Raymond Williams has suggested, "A triumphant urban and industrial economy remade the countryside ...in its own compensating image."⁵⁸ Georgian poetry supplied much of the raw material of that compensating image, and in so doing shored up the cultural outlook of a doomed Liberal England.

Some historians have tried to see in this anti-industrial bias the origins of Britain's economic decline as a world power.⁵⁹ Georgianism certainly sponsored an enthusiasm for pastoral themes which nurtured its readership's hostility towards the practices of trade and commerce upon which its prosperity depended. But in an era where competition for markets and aggressive technological rivalries made significant contributions towards the outbreak of war, it is perhaps worth considering whether the Georgian poetic, for all its anti-didactic maxims, did in fact harbour a sense of humanity, of community even, commendably at odds with the social and political trends of the time:

I have understood that I desire from art
And from creation not repeated things
Of every day, not the mean content
Or discontent of average helpless souls,
Not passionate abstractions of loveliness
But unmatched moments and exceptional deeds
And all that cannot happen every day.⁶⁰

Georgianism and War

Marsh arranged for the publication of Graves' first volume of poems, Over the Brazier (1916). But by the time he came to include Graves in the 1917 Georgian anthology, the whole Georgian experiment had been overtaken by the war, the same war which dealt the coalition

of interests protected by the Liberal Party a fatal blow. Neither English poetry nor English polity were to be quite the same again.

In his last year at Charterhouse Graves had taken to Georgian verse with an enthusiasm he rarely felt towards mainstream literature:

... I felt greatly honoured to be asked what contemporary poets should, in my opinion, be included in the first issue of his (Marsh's) Georgian Poetry. He ... asked to see poems of my own.⁶¹

Graves strove with an unpracticed eye to bring the Georgian realistic observation of detail into the poems he wrote recording his initial responses to the war. Sassoon and Owen, each of them much more conscious than he of the element of artifice which went into the creation of such realism, understood that in order to convey the unique horror of the trenches, a direct confrontation with experience was required. Graves attempted a similar engagement with experience by dwelling upon his visceral reactions to the sights and sounds of the war.

...Today I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:
Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.
("A Dead Boche")⁶²

The poem is undeniably realistic. John H. Johnston found it to be one of the first war poems to deal explicitly with the physical effects of battle.⁶³ But the emotional range is narrow. The scene provokes in both poet and reader only a feeling of disgust which effaces the humanity of the dead soldier by focusing instead upon the writer's revulsion at what he is seeing. He does not see a man, only a jumble of loathsomely disfigured limbs towards which it is impossible to feel any sympathy.

Instead of engaging directly with his experience, Graves succeeded only at evasion in these first attempts at recording his emotional response to the war. "The Dead Foxhunter" begins with a favourite sort of Great War anecdote: the poet discovers the corpse of a "little captain" who kept his dying moans from disclosing his comrades' position by putting his fingers "tight clenched between his teeth." But the poem does not probe the irony, or even the heroism of the incident. Instead, it collapses into a bourgeois fantasy of the captain's afterlife, claiming that an eternity of heavenly foxhunting is the reward to which the brave fellow has gone, "So if Heaven had no Hunt before he came,/Why it must find one now."⁶⁴

Other elements of a bourgeois warrior ethic continued to cling to Graves, despite the resistance he had shown towards them at Charterhouse. His hatred of the war was never once blunted. But he did begin to fall under the influence of the army's authority structure, impressed, as many erstwhile pacifists had been, by the command principle which galvanised men into fighting units. He had no hesitation in naming his response to this. He called it "pride":

It doesn't matter what's the cause,
 What wrong they say we're righting,
 A curse for treaties, bonds and laws
 When we've to do the fighting!
 And since we lads are proud and true,
 What else remains to do?
 Lucasta, when to France your man
 Returns his fourth time hating war,
 Yet laughs as calmly as he can,
 And flings an oath but says no more,
 That is not courage, that's not fear-
 Lucasta, he's a fusilier
 And his pride sends him here.

("To Lucasta on Going to the Wars-for the Fourth Time")⁶⁵

Beginning to take shape in this poem is an esprit de corps indifferent to the material causes of war because caught up by the extremities of feeling to which war exposes its participants, conferring the

special kind of unity upon which armies depend to function. Commenting upon the emergence of this feeling in modern combat, the historian William H. McNeill has remarked, "... the rank and file found real psychological satisfaction in blind unthinking obedience, and in the rituals of military routine. Prideful esprit de corps became a palpable reality for hundreds of thousands of human beings ..."⁶⁶ "What else remains to do?" The question is emptied of any real substance by a dangerously depoliticized introspection which severs the military life from its social context, an act of closure prophylactic against further enquiry because comprehensible purely to its participants and no one else.

This device collaborates effectively with Graves' own evasion of his experience. The most personal of losses and hurts are presented indirectly in order to distance them from the poet's vulnerable psyche. This can have mixed consequences. The death of a close friend in "Goliath and David" is described emblematically, in an intertextual engagement with the Old Testament story which questions its veracity:

... He swears
That he's killed lions, he's killed bears,
And those that scorn the God of Zion
Shall perish so like bear or lion.
But... the historian of that fight
Had not the heart to tell it right.⁶⁷

The rewriting of the story is intended to make clear the real logic of war, where superior strength prevails regardless of justice, and where no "God will save." The intention is to shock the reader with the arbitrariness of combat, where no unfolding purpose can be discerned. "God's eyes are dim, His ears are shut" contrasts harshly with the providential pattern of a Bible story indelibly marked on the reader's memory, and Graves exploits the contrast:

'I'm hit! I'm killed!' young David cries,

Throws blindly forward, chokes... and dies.
 And look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim,
 Goliath straddles over him.

What saves the poem from a full-scale confrontation with the experience which motivated it are the intertextual features which effectively obstruct its proximity to trench warfare. The epic setting and the archaic diction ("in brazen mail," "Goodly-faced boy," "Steel crosses wood") seem far removed from the death of a soldier "killed at Fricourt, March 1916." Moreover, David is described as "calm and brave", and commended for his disregard for personal safety, qualities vital to the established concept of the fighting man. The poem's debt to the Old Testament story effectively forestalls its attempt at a realistic deflation of popular ideas of combat, and it seems remote from the realities of trench warfare.

The harder Graves tried to come to grips with his own experience, the further he slid into a self-contained realm of soldiering discontinuous with the outside world. Memory, homesickness, fear overtake the poetry, but not in a way that gives rise to anger as they did in the case of Sassoon. "The First Funeral", ostensibly about "the first corpse I saw... on the German wires," in fact does not mention the trenches at all, substituting instead a childhood recollection of burying a dead dog. The nursery tone and the contrast with the adult experience are intended to convey the routine carelessness with which the enemy dead are treated. But as the verses progress, the poem's links with the initial incident are stretched to breaking point.

We poked him through the clover
 Into a hole, and then
 We threw brown earth right over
 And said: "Poor dog, Amen!"⁶⁸

The swerve away from the harsh realities of war into a verse-

fantasy escapism became a regular feature of Graves' war poetry, prophetic of a larger refusal of the modern, mechanized world in his later work. In "Limbo" he begins with a genuine Rosenberg-like attempt to record accurately the natural and human landscapes of the trenches:

After a week spent under raining skies,
In horror, mud and sleeplessness, a week
Of bursting shells, of blood and hideous cries
And the ever-watchful sniper...⁶⁹

But the effort proves more than his imagination can bear, and the realism subsides into an infantile escapism where the conventional pastoral descriptions fall well below the standard of clear observation achieved by Georgian pastoral:

And then one night relief comes, and we go
Miles back into the sunny cornland where
Babies like tickling, and where tall white horses
Draw the plough leisurely in quiet courses.⁷⁰

Since it is so stereotyped, the pastoral description does nothing to throw the picture of the trenches into sharper relief. Instead it suggests a mind incapable of handling its experience because imprisoned within a worn-out set of literary mannerisms, whose response is entirely predetermined by categories of thought drawn from an incompletely-grasped poetic. In his later poetry, Graves will offer us an entirely revamped version of the pastoral, one which is a challenge to the mechanistic oppression of modern life. But here he writes only a stilted mock-pastoral that appears as a refusal of reality.

Synthetic feeling is impossible to separate from authentic in war literature because the construction of a military outlook is such a factitious endeavour. What John Keegan has called "the 'rhetoric of battle history'"⁷¹ permeated the institutions which shaped the young Graves' perspective on his predicament in the trenches.

We have seen this at work in the manufacture of pride and esprit de corps, and we shall see it at work again in moulding his response to civilians. But this observation does not give us the right to question the outstanding subjective force of these feelings. They were to play a vital part in holding together Graves' identity through the war mainly because they located him within a system of relationships akin to nothing he had known before; relationships, perhaps, artificially sustained by some of the fictions of war, but subjectively real nevertheless. Graves described the bond with his comrades most openly in "Two Fusiliers":

Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the wet bond of blood,
By friendship blossoming from mud,
By Death: we faced him, and we found
Beauty in Death,
In dead men, breath.⁷²

The "bond of blood" discriminates fiercely between combatants and non-combatants, lending to Graves' plight a sense of comradeship that was to intensify as the war approached its bloody conclusion. Solidarity in the face of death, overlaid by that aestheticism which finds "Beauty in Death," is difficult to separate from the morbid effusions of the nineties decadents, and is as artificial as any other aspect of military rhetoric. But the homoerotic bond which held men together in the trenches, deeply rooted in that same pre-War English culture, informed much of the most plangent verse of Owen, Sorley and Blunden.⁷³ Factitious or not, there is no denying its influence upon Graves and his contemporaries.

In this context, the proximity of death reinforces a principle of comradeship which once again exhibits the double-edged quality of Graves' response to his surroundings. While seeming to endorse a familiar military fiction, the elevation of disinterested comradeship

also seals the soldiers off from the more crass sentiments of unthinking patriotism, jingoism and imperialist rhetoric which helped sustain the war. The mystical qualities of comradeship, such as its capacity for abolishing the separation between the living and the dead, harbour perils because they threaten to make of warfare an exclusively sanctified activity. "Beauty in Death,/In dead men, breath" has a fatally enticing aspect because art is being used to sanitize war and make of it an attractive, almost life-enhancing pursuit. But Graves was prepared to pay this price in order to make sense of his own tangled emotions.

Goodbye To All That

The first thing to notice about Goodbye To All That is that it is a bundle of different texts all held together by the claims of 'autobiography'. Within its covers are to be found letters, diary entries, casualty lists, newspaper clippings, question-and-answer scripts, play scenes, official documents, examination papers, poems and pieces of narrative. Normally the raw materials of official history, these texts are assembled in such a way as to stress their absurdity, their departure from commonly-assumed notions of 'reality'. There are propaganda news clippings about some Belgian priests hung up as clappers in their own church bells (61),⁷⁴ hilarious attack orders from command posts days behind in their intelligence reports (204), decoding errors which send a battalion destined for York to Cork. The excruciating propaganda letter "by a Little Mother" (188) is deliberately contrasted with the despair of Sassoon's "A Soldier's Declaration." (213).

Factual errors and preposterous information are taken to indicate in the book the impossibility of putting together an objective report of experience in a time of crisis. The collage of texts, interwoven

by the uncertain thread of personal memoir, gives only partial, incomplete or distorted versions of the truth, and Graves seems to be suggesting that the objective point of view is no longer available to his generation. No self-conscious reflections are offered on the nature of memory or autobiography. It becomes clear in the course of Goodbye To All That that the idea of a self discovering its identity in relation to its surroundings has been lost between the interleavings of different versions of reality. Graves' war poems document a self retreating before an overwhelming onslaught on the psyche. His autobiography suggests that psychic disintegration is simply an effect of historical flux, where there are only many varied and irrational accounts of reality competing in a textual cacophany as disorienting as any battlefield.

Within this disorder, certain emotional states become the writer's only barrier against madness, a madness to which many of his generation were to succumb. These emotional states were themselves often derived from traditional ways of seeing the military life, but this in no way compromised their oppositional stance.

There can be no doubt that Graves' antipathy towards the public domain, and, by extension, to the values of the modern world at large, sprang from his wartime experiences. In the chronicle of Goodbye To All That, Graves recalls a deep-seated conviction of the soldier - which soon became a habit of the mind - that the public world, the world beyond the trenches, encompassed all the greed, insensitivity, aggression and mendacity which had caused the war in the first place and which cynically prolonged it.

Coextensive with this conviction was the stated belief of many combatants that, ironically, all the truly human values of love, loyalty, self-sacrifice and community were to be found among the soldiers of the front line where, at one point on Graves' sector, 60,000 men

a day went to their deaths. A little later Graves could write of living

...between the suppressed instincts of love and fear; the officer's actual love which he could never openly show, for the boys he commanded, and the fear, also hidden under a forced gaiety, of the horrible death that threatened them all.⁷⁵

The fierce esprit de corps of the trenches fostered a sense of loyalty in the face of appalling conditions which soon vented its acute and justifiable bitterness against an assortment of Establishment antagonists. The General Staff, the press, the profiteers, and, eventually, the whole population of complacent civilians back home came to be construed as the real Enemy, the real source of conflict.

Graves, in common with many young men of his generation, grew to believe that the war had been unnecessarily protracted and, consequently, grew to despise the social and political order which had initiated it. He reacted bitterly against the official journalist who described Graves' men as attacking shouting "'Avenge the Lusitania!'"(241). He supported Sassoon's protest to the General Staff though he lied deliberately to save Sassoon from court-martial: "The irony of having to argue to these mad old men that Siegfried was not sane!"(216). He reacted fiercely against the homespun pietism which portrayed the war as a national crusade: "There was no patriotism in the trenches ...not one soldier in a hundred was inspired by religious feeling of even the crudest kind"(134/5). Most notably, Goodbye To All That is peppered with incidents which convey Graves' anger at the complacency of non-combatants:

Some friends of the family came in one night and began telling me of the Zeppelin air-raids, of bombs dropped only three streets off. 'Well, do you know,' I said, 'the other day I was asleep in a house and in the early morning a bomb dropped next door and killed three soldiers

who were billeted there, a woman, and a child.'
 'Good, gracious,' they cried, 'what did you do then?'
 'It was at a place called Beuvry, about four miles behind the trenches,' I explained, 'and I was tired out, so I went to sleep again.'
 'Oh,' they said, 'but that happened in France!' and the look of interest faded from their faces as though I had taken them in with a stupid catch.(120)

Graves' options, however, did not include pacifism, for pacifism, too, was a way of thinking generated by the defunct culture out of which the war had arisen. Hence his impatience, bordering on contempt with the pacifist 'sets' of Bertrand Russell and Ottoline Morell who incited Sassoon into making rash, anti-militarist, and potentially treasonable, protests. The effete intellectuals of Garsington Manor were as remote from the truth of trench warfare as the jingoists. Their pacifism was part of the problem, not the solution, and, in reality, of a piece with the moral bankruptcy which had allowed the war to begin and then to continue:

Bertrand Russell, too old for military service, but an ardent pacifist (a rare combination), turned sharply on me one afternoon and asked:
 'Tell me, if a company of your men were brought along to break a strike of munition makers, and the munition makers refused to go back to work, would you order the men to fire?'
 'Yes, if everything else failed. It would be no worse than shooting Germans, really.'
 He asked in surprise: 'Would your men obey you?'
 'They loathe munition-workers, and would be only too glad of a chance to shoot a few. They think that they're all skrim-shankers.'
 'But they realise that the war's all wicked nonsense?'
 'Yes, as well as I do.'
 He could not understand my attitude.(205)

Inexorably, for Graves, as for Sassoon and many others, life came to be equated with trench life, endorsing the view of Andrew Rutherford that "...if an ethic had to be extrapolated from his war narrative and commentary in Goodbye To All That, it would be

a bleakly heroic code which insists on courage in battle regardless of the cause or prospect of success ...an assertion of heroic manhood in an otherwise meaningless universe."⁷⁶

This goes some way to explaining the terrible irony of the situation in which the wounded poets, Graves, Sassoon and Owen found themselves when discharged to Craiglockart Military Hospital in Edinburgh: rather than seizing the opportunity to renounce the conflict and commit themselves to challenging the Establishment's incompetence, they each displayed a grim determination to return to their men, with whom they felt a special identity of interest. This was a purified, mystical identity, perhaps nourished by a homoerotic aestheticism of "doomed youth", but virile and daring nonetheless, raised to an almost sacred status by the essentially voluntary nature of the first wave of troops and of the sacrifice to which they unswervingly committed themselves.⁷⁷

"The only psychological posture that seemed to suffice effectively was one which depended on the strength of personal pride, and the desire to support one's comrades," writes Diane De Bell of Goodbye To All That.⁷⁸ To this we can add another quality without which Graves would not have survived, and which finds its way to the centre of his myth. Words which returned to him "like a charm whenever things were bad" were those of a famous soldier's hymn, "He that shall endure to the end, shall be saved." (129). He ended the first edition of Goodbye To All That absorbing the suffering of war into the ongoing process of biography by placing his experience of the trenches beneath the rubric of endurance:

I shall no longer repeat to myself: 'He who shall endure to the end, shall be saved.' It is enough to say that I have endured.⁷⁹

So the textual confusion of the book is closed with an inscription

which stamps everything with the controlling authority of the writer's personality.

The Nursery of Myth

The flight from reality evinced in the sub-pastoral verse discussed above, and burlesqued in the textual figurations of Goodbye To All That, found its fullest expression in the childhood poems Graves wrote during the war. In these poems, childhood memories and fantasies form a kind of annexe to the pastoral in which the poet can shelter from the harsh excesses of his immediate sensations, but which is constantly menaced by obscure shadows from the violent and dangerous realm of the trenches.

The brief section of Over the Brazier entitled "Nursery Memories" tries to juxtapose day-to-day trench life (usually confined to citation in a subtitle) with the activities of the nursery. But a poem like "The Adventure"⁸⁰ fails because its comparison between childhood fantasy and the boasts of a machine-gun team succeeds in reducing war to a game and loses all sight of the military action which prompted the comparison. Similarly, the attempt to emphasize the inhumanity of the trenches in "1915" by pastoral contrasts fails when the brief mention of "...Winter nights knee-deep in mud or snow" becomes submerged in a set of literary clichés, "pictures, books,/Music, the quiet of an English wood."⁸¹ Graves' infantile nursery-garden seems a poor refuge from which to contemplate the outrages of war.

However, in his earliest verse, Graves insists on identifying the nursery and the nursery rhyme with a healthy spontaneity absent from the "far-flung webs of ink" spilled in the pursuit of a more self-conscious poetry:

But may the gift of heavenly peace
And glory for all time

Keep the boy Tom who tending geese
 First made the nursery rhyme.
 ("Wild Strawberries") 82

"Heavenly peace", here, is, quite simply, the absence of war, because the first function of the nursery at this stage is to provide a place of escape from the war. Devindra Kohli has valuably discussed the recurrence of nursery rhyme formulae and phraseology in Graves' verse,⁸³ but he does not take his discussion far enough and fails to connect it with the larger patterns of Graves' early development, particularly the sublimation of the internal conflicts raised by the war.

On the one hand, nursery rhymes provided a suitable vehicle for Graves to withdraw from the torments of the front line, because they could carry him back to the undifferentiated world of his pre-school childhood, the world of Alfred Percival's library and his mother's Bible stories. But the nursery rhyme was an untrustworthy mode in which to essay such an escape, because, once freighted with Graves' wartime anxieties, it released its own intrinsic violence into his poetry.

English nursery rhymes are a notoriously violent, sometimes mindlessly cruel, part of childhood pastimes. Full of mutilations, dismemberments, jealousy, murder, homicidal giants, cannibals and ferocious animals, they imprint a hypertrophied image of violence on the child's mind, one which enabled Graves to observe astutely, "nine-tenths of the unfortunates who suffered shell-shock in the war were wearing their wounded stripes for injuries received on the Nursery Front."⁸⁴ His own horror of combat fatigue is expressed in a dream-poem which gathers into its kaleidoscope of images fragments of nursery material and a half-memory of the absurd zoology of the nursery rhyme:

He had faded, he was gone
 Years ago with Nursery Land,

When he leapt on me again
 From the clank of a night train,
 Overpowered me foot and head,
 Lapped my blood, while on and on
 The old voice cruel and flat,
 Purred for ever, "Cat!...Cat!...Cat..."
 ("A Child's Nightmare")⁸⁵

It was this transformation of nursery material into a means of exploring his own tormented psyche that led Louis MacNeice to note, "Graves has...brought a metaphysical attitude into the nursery."⁸⁶ In withdrawing to his nursery Graves found that he encountered a garishly analagous conflict situation, and one with the resources in its weird bestiary to give flesh to his deepest fears.

Immersion in his nursery dream-world gradually forces out through the poetry a recognition on Graves' part of the latent violence of the nursery-rhyme, and the lineaments of its continuity with the organized violence of warfare. In "The Next War" he considers how children rehearse for war in the apparently innocent activities of the nursery:

And children here will thrust and poke,
 Shoot and die, and laugh at the joke,
 With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
 Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers.⁸⁷

By the time he comes to write "Recalling the War" his grasp of this process has matured, and the innocence of the nursery has been replaced by a darker vision of childhood corrupted by these shaping influences. Behind the sweet nursery-rhyme diction lurks the unfolding pattern of aggression made blind to the realities of its actions by the illusion of game-playing:

...the merry ways of guns -
 Nibbling the walls of factory and church
 Like a child, piecrust; felling groves of trees
 Like a child, dandelions with a switch!
 Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill,
 Down in a row the brave tin-soldiers fall:⁸⁸

The repetition of "Like a child" and the imperceptible shift from mock-killing to real killing suggest a dawning realisation in Graves' mind of the extent of the nursery realm's implication in the crimes of the trenches. I think it is this realisation to which Trilling points when he tells us that Graves' nursery imagery belongs neither with "domesticity nor...some lingering piety of Victorianism, but a certain kind of actuality which modulates the fierce modern intellectual will."⁸⁹ We need only modify it slightly by suggesting that Graves originally sought domesticity in his nursery experiments but found instead all the terrors waiting beneath its smooth Georgian exterior.

"Babylon" shows a further advance in Graves' attitude to childhood in its acceptance of the qualitative difference between the child's and the man's approach to experience. It recognizes loss while welcoming the breakdown of the nursery setting as a context for poetry: "He's forgotten how he smiled/And shrieked at snowdrops when a child."⁹⁰ But by far the best of these early poems on childhood is "A Boy in Church", superior to the others because its vision of the pastoral is not an escape from the real world, but rather a reproach to its inadequacies.

"A Boy in Church" sets Graves' upbringing in a strict Protestant Christianity against the child's susceptibility to the forces of nature, this time expressed in a poetry which strains the boundaries of Georgian pastoral:

Outside it blows wetter and wetter,
The tossing trees never stay still;
I shift my elbows to catch better
The full round sweep of heathered hill.
The tortured copse bends to and fro
In silence like a shadow-show.⁹¹

This kind of wild natural landscape is a foretaste of the setting

in which Graves will encounter his Lunar Muse. In it is implied a rejection, as insufficient, of the locus amoenus which had brought solace to the dark days of his soldiering. Here the self confronts a landscape animated by a violence and energy which incorporate the destructive forces of the trenches while at the same time challenging the categories through which that self has hitherto been shaped and made known to itself. The Church symbolises all the agencies of religion, family and social conditioning designed, in Graves' terms, to confine the self. As the poem progresses, elements of the charged natural world ("(Look! there's a plover!/Its gone!) Who's that Saint by the Lake?") encroach upon the bastion in which the socially-constructed self is secreted, threatening its authority, and destabilizing the self's perceptions of the world. The Boy backs off from a rejection of the authority-figures governing his life, but not before he has recognized that there are irrational natural forces resistant to the claims of that authority and drawing him towards their alternative account of reality: "But a dumb blast sets the trees swaying/With furious zeal like madmen praying."

Psychology and Myth

The strong contradictory impulses to which Graves' psyche was exposed, and the failure of his culture and his upbringing to provide him with the means of resolving them, brought his mind crashing down in neurasthenic ruin. His poetry, particularly when in its pastoral mode it achieved a genuinely fresh perspective on the war, went some way to postponing his collapse. But these moments were too rare and too uncertain, the poetry inadequately distanced from a set of cultural meanings Graves knew to be superannuated. Yet Graves did not possess the independence to cut himself free from the identity afforded by his culture, though, as Goodbye To All That confirms,

he was quite capable of exposing the fictions on which it was based.

An intense experience of comradeship, and the fitful consolations of a derivative pastoral, seemed to be the only positive feelings with which his injured psyche emerged from the war. The impact of his relationship with his brother-soldiers was to persist in Graves' mind even after he had developed a mythic critique of technological warfare, suggesting that fifty years after the events in question he had come to recognize the association of the profession of arms and the profession of poetry in the essentially elite perceptions of the soldier and the poet:

At the outbreak of the First World War I volunteered for the regular infantry and found myself among men whom detestable trench conditions and persistent danger either destroyed or ennobled. Although we were caught in a demonic machine, officially sanctified by a corps of regular padres; although the war's final result would be worse than the power-politics that had caused it, ordinary civilized virtues had given place to heroic ones. We remained free because we were volunteers and bound to one another by a suicidal sacrament. Holding a trench to the last round of ammunition and the last man, taking a one-in-three chance of life when rescuing a badly wounded comrade from no-man's-land, keeping up a defiant pride in our soldierly appearance: these were poetic virtues. Our reward lay in their practice, with possible survival as a small bright light seen at the end of a long tunnel. We despised all civilians; wounds were nothing by comparison with the grief of losing new-found friends in the periodic massacres. Yet after only a few weeks of trench life in a dangerous sector we grew sick, poisoned by our own adrenal glands, our memories became impaired and the sense of crisis grew less intense; it took some of us as long as ten years to recover our health.⁹²

He was to discuss the implications of comradeship in expressly mythic terms when writing about the nature of sacrifice among certain African tribes: "The royal okrafu priests of Ghana who, three or four centuries ago periodically died for their queen or king, did

so in loving free will." ⁹³ The voluntary nature of the sacrifice - the willing embrace of violent death - is what establishes the "bond of blood"; apparently meaningless violence is lent a purpose by the intention of the victim, which is in turn set against the background of a system of beliefs - a myth, in fact - which accords purpose to the action. Sacrifices "Performed for the good of others, are humanly no less deserving of praise..." particularly when they come from "soldiers who die fighting heroically..." Graves goes on:

British volunteers of the First World War (King George V's willing okrafu priests) suffered immensely heavier casualties without losing their fighting morale than did the conscripts of the Second.

The dying and rising god, consort of the Goddess, and the true poet's most fateful self-dramatisation, also embraces the violence of self-sacrifice and the finality of death, like the "willing okrafu priests," because he perceives his actions against a background of meaningful symbolic relationships.

If the intentionality of comradeship and sacrifice was modulating inevitably into a mythic discourse, so was Graves' post-war understanding of the nursery pastoral with which he had shored up his sanity. A contemporary anthropologist, R.R. Marett, could observe:

...there is an underworld in which all have been reared, namely, the nursery. It may, thanks to a nurse of the old-fashioned type, have direct relations with the underworld of peasant folklore, but in any case it has analogous tradition of its own, and one as conservative as any known to man. Here old time values retain their spell.⁹⁴

The underworld into which Graves' nursery pastoral led him was the realm of his own unconscious, which rose up with nightmare force in the wake of his neurasthenia or combat-fatigue.

Systematic or clinical understanding of the unconscious was in its infancy in the English-speaking world when Graves came to be treated for his nervous disorders. However, he was fortunate enough to come under the care of Dr W.H.R. Rivers, an evolutionary anthropologist, ethnologist and pioneer Freudian. The 'common-sense' psychoanalysis practised by Rivers has been much commented on, and several Graves critics and biographers have dwelt on the kind of treatment he offered Graves.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, the main works in which Rivers' ideas are contained, Instinct and the Unconscious (1920) and Conflict and Dream (1923),⁹⁶ were published after his research on neurasthenics, and represent views which must only have been in formation when he took charge of Graves' treatment. Moreover, contrary to the belief of many critics, Graves was never personally tended by Rivers.⁹⁷

What Rivers' theories did were to provide Graves with an alternative, psychological discourse for furthering his own self-examination. Literature, as defined by high culture, had proved only partially successful at organizing experience, and the textual anarchy of Goodbye To All That had served only to underline the fragility of accepted notions of the self despite its commitment to 'endurance'. Applying a simplified Freudianism to his patients, Rivers held that dreams and other states of consciousness, such as poetic inspiration, less open to the censorious pressures of the superego, allowed the various sub-personalities harboured by the unconscious to express their conflicting impulses. It was then the job of analysis to examine this conflict, and bring to light its underlying causes in the fears, guilt, anxiety and contradictions suffered by the patient.

The success Rivers had in supervising Graves' treatment lay in part in his belief that the writing of poetry shared with dream-states an access route into the conflicts of the unconscious. Poetry could be another means of expressing and resolving the interplay of the

sub-personalities. This chimed with the hitherto abortive attempts Graves had made to penetrate his own dilemmas by exploring the altered states of the nursery, the pastoral retreat and childhood. A man who had written, "I looked, and ah! my wraith before me stood, / His head all battered in by violent blows"⁹⁸ had evidently come face-to-face with aspects of himself created out of fear and evasion.

Graves took to these theories for another reason, too. Rivers' interest in ethnology meant that his theories were coloured by at least some study, albeit secondhand, of primitive societies. His examples came frequently from such sources, and the antiquarian instincts in Graves responded enthusiastically. In a little-known lecture delivered in 1912 to the Folklore Society, Rivers advanced some rudimentary theories concerning the interaction of myth with the social institutions "of peoples of crude culture".⁹⁹ His argument is laden with the ethnocentrism then prevalent in anthropology, and his insights are spoiled by a failure to grasp effectively the ways in which primitive peoples construct their world pictures. But he does offer a revealing definition of myth, one with a close affinity to the theories of Graves' later writings:

...a myth is a narrative which gives an account of the coming into being of man himself or of his environment, natural or social.¹⁰⁰

The emphasis on the narrative status of myth is uncharacteristic of its time, and although Rivers interprets the evidence using the functionalist model of the ritualist school, he is nevertheless alert to the close involvement of myth with esoteric belief-systems, to the interdependence of mythic narrative and principles of interpretation manipulated by "social institutions":

The principle I venture to suggest is that it is not the especially familiar and uniform which becomes the subject of myth...but for this pur-

pose there is necessary such an element of variety and of apparent, if not real, inconsistency as will attract attention and arouse curiosity.¹⁰¹

Mythic narrative does not simply 'explain', it actively shapes that which is being explained.

Rivers' psycho-mythology informs the theories of the three main scholarly works of Graves' early career: On English Poetry (1922), The Meaning of Dreams (1925) and Poetic unreason (1925).¹⁰² Discussion of the purely cognitive aspects of these works can be found in a later chapter. But as early as On English Poetry we can see that psychology is shifting into myth. The writing of poetry is being sacralised. Dissatisfaction with a purely formalist, psychogenic account of artistic creativity expresses itself as a mystification of the means of literary production:

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

Similarly, the poet appears in the first of his many shaman-guises in Graves' writings:

The poet, a highly-developed witch-doctor... plays on all the emotions and serves as comprehensive and universal a God as he can conceive.

By projecting the psychological account of inspiration into a mythic past, poetry is saved from a purely materialist explanatory model. Alternatively, Graves has passed up another opportunity to problematise the place of poetry in shaping his culture, and, instead, reasserts a transcendental signifier at the heart of psychology:

Members of a primitive society would solemnly recount their dreams to the wise ones of the clan and ask them to draw an inference. Soon it happened that, in cases where the dream was forgotten... the peculiarly gifted witch doctor

or priestess would induce a sort of self-hypnotism and in the light of the dream so dreamed, utter an oracle which contained an answer to the problem proposed.

Psychology has here been replaced by a theory of oracular utterance, one which protects poetry from investigation by restating its essentialist bond with a realm of meaning beyond rational understanding, beyond, even, language:

In these rhythmic dream utterances, intoxicating a primitive community to sympathetic emotional action...Poetry...originated, and the dream symbolism of Poetry was further encouraged by the restrictions of the taboo, which made definite references to certain people, gods and objects unlucky.¹⁰³

All in all, this is a compelling piece of pseudo-anthropology, a hotch-potch of romantic ideas of inspiration masquerading as ethnology. It makes of poetry a marvellously erotic piece of theatre, complete with the intoxication of "a primitive community to sympathetic emotional action," a dubious experiment in the creation of a Volksgeist with the poet as presiding genius.

The critic Paul Fussell has pointed out that the Great War restored mythic writing as a central sensibility of modernity.¹⁰⁴ Following Northrop Frye, he suggests that the vast shift in consciousness wrought by the war revived important mythic paradigms as a means of registering the experience of war, of making it meaningful to the culture it had so seriously damaged. Fussell's argument finds ample credence in the early career of Robert Graves, which shows us a creative artist reaching out for mythic paradigms as a means of interpreting to itself the culture from which he had come.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. cf. Robert Graves, Goodbye To All That (London: Penguin, 1960: a reprint of the Second, 1957, Revised Edition) pp. 40-41. All references, unless otherwise stated, are to this 2nd, revised edition. All references to the 1st edition (1929) will be clearly indicated.
2. Donald Davie, "In the Pity", New Statesman, 28 August, 1964, pp. 282-83.
3. Principally, Brian Gardner (ed), Up the Line to Death (London, 1964); Ian Parsons (ed), Men Who March Away (London, 1965); Maurice Hussey (ed), Poetry of the First World War (London, 1967); E. L. Black (ed), 1914-18 in Poetry (London, 1970).
4. Jon Silkin (ed), The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry (1st edn, Harmondsworth, 1979) p.38.
5. See in particular Dominic Hibberd and John Onions (eds) Poetry of the Great War, An Anthology (Basingstoke, 1986) pp. 1-7. See also Dominic Hibberd The Poet's War, BBC Radio 3, 28 February 1984. As far as the military history record is concerned, this process began early on, with Douglas Jerrold, The Lie about the War (London, 1930). It is continued in the work of Correlli Barnett, "A Military Historian's View of the Great War", in Essays by Divers Hands xxvi (London, 1970), pp. 1-18; and John Terraine, The Smoke and the Fire (London, 1981).
6. Hibberd and Onions, op. cit. p3.
7. Robert Graves, Over the Brazier (London, 1916); David and Goliath (London, 1916); Fairies and Fusiliers (London, 1918).
8. Jon Silkin (ed), The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry (2nd edn, Harmondsworth, 1981), p.120. "To Robert Nichols", in Fairies and Fusiliers, pp. 18-19.
9. In September 1914 the Government invited twenty-five writers to a secret propaganda conference. The participants included Thomas Hardy, Conan Doyle, G.K. Chesterton and Laurence Binyon. See D.G. Wright, "The Great War, Government Propaganda and English 'Men of Letters' 1914-16", Literature and History vii (Spring, 1978), pp.70-100.
10. This problem is especially pronounced in the studies by Kirkham and Canary. Kirkham wants a simple division between conventional and protest writing in Graves' war poetry: Michael Kirkham, The Poetry of Robert Graves (London, 1969), pp.12-14. This seems to me to obscure the extent to which the so-called protest verse relies upon a traditional mythology of soldiering. Canary also stresses the process of disillusionment evident in Graves' war verse, but he fails to see how the war was germane to the 'illusions' Graves was later to develop: Robert H. Canary, Robert Graves (Boston, 1980), pp. 34-38. The thesis of James Mehoke's deeply confused study is that Graves' later mythology was a reaction against the horrors of war. This leads Mehoke to some valuable insights, but it is fatally flawed by his failure to recognize the parts played by violence and endurance in Graves' mature writings: James Mehoke, Robert Graves: Peace-Weaver (The Hague, 1975), passim.

11. Wilfred Owen, Preface to the volume of Poems unpublished at his death. See Jon Stallworthy (ed), The Poems of Wilfred Owen (London, 1985), p. 192. Stallworthy tells us that Owen thought of calling the volume English Elegies but abandoned the idea (Ibid).
12. Ibid p. 117.
13. Goodbye To All That, pp. 121ff. See also Letter To Edward Marsh, 29 December 1917: Paul O'Prey (ed), In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914-1946 (London, 1982), p. 90.
14. Siegfried Sassoon, The War Poems (London, 1983), p. 45, p. 24.
15. Ian Parsons (ed), The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg (London, 1984), p. 116, pp. 138-51.
16. "The Sun Used to Shine", R. George Thomas (ed), The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas (London, 1981) p. 106. "Digging", Ibid, p. 80.
17. David Jones, In Parenthesis, 3rd ed. (London, 1978), p. ix.
18. Ibid pp. xii-xiii.
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98. "The Morning Before The Battle", Over the Brazier, p. 21.

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101. Ibid p. 34. This lecture has been used by one author to suggest that Rivers is to be regarded as a forerunner of structural anthropology because of the emphasis he placed upon the role of kinship in the ordering of mythology: Ian Langham, The Building of British Social Anthropology: W.H.R. Rivers and his Cambridge Disciples in the Development of Kinship Studies, 1898-1931 (Reidel, 1982). But see also the extremely hostile review of this book by Rodney Needham, Times Literary Supplement, February 12 1982, 164.

102. Robert Graves, The Meaning of Dreams (London, 1925). There is a useful discussion of this book in Canary, op. cit. pp. 24-25.

103. On English Poetry, pp. 19-20.

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Chapter 2: Authority and Subversion: the Paradox of Myth

Myth, Modernity, Writing

The history of myth has yet to be written. Nor can it be until scholarship recognizes the interdependence of myth and the belief systems through which it is mediated to an audience of readers and chorus of participants. This stricture applies not only to the mythic narratives themselves and the matrix of social institutions which made up their original context, but also to the intellectual priorities and biases of later enquirers who have sought to make myth an object of study and research. For example, our present understanding can be furthered only when we appreciate that the modern interest in myth - and by modern I mean that which dates from the Enlightenment - was for generations confined to the margins of respectable scholarship, the preserve of part-timers and eccentrics whose speculations were founded upon rumour, travellers' tales, Freemasonic sortilege and an imperfect grasp of ancient languages. A huge body of writing, once the passionate avocation of a large section of dissenting lower-middle-class intellectuals, is only now beginning to re-emerge into the daylight of criticism, forcing upon us a drastic re-examination of the roots of mythological studies.¹ The career of William Blake most aptly mirrors the life and opinions of this class, and his recent 'rediscovery' as a major literary figure perhaps prefigures a rehabilitation of its hitherto discounted interests and pastimes.

The process by which high culture steadily appropriated the study of myth, gradually investing it with huge significance for the understanding of modern consciousness, is a fascinating one. It involved the reinstatement of a form of discourse an earlier Age of Reason had actively despised and condemned to the same oblivion as astrology, peasant superstition and folkcustom. The fact that it accompanied

a scientific revolution which blew apart the edifice of Newtonian physics, and was itself allied to the revival of spiritualism, and to the primitivist creeds of social thinkers from both left and right, leads inevitably to the conclusion that it was nothing less than a "paradigm-shift" in modern thought. Early twentieth-century accounts of the importance of myth shaded off, on the one hand, into the theosophical mutterings of Madame Blavatsky, and, on the other, into the dubiously authoritarian ideas of order which so haunted T.S. Eliot:

It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form Mr Aldington so earnestly desires. And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance.²

The implied conflict, in Eliot's theory, between history and myth should alert us to several of the discursive practices in which myth is implicated in the modern imagination. The complex systems of production, exchange and interaction which are the salient features of industrial living manifest themselves to Eliot simply as an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy". History takes on a recognizably human shape only through the imposition of a mythic schema which discloses certain unfolding patterns of order visible only from the artist's privileged perspective. Myth is being used here to control and shape human experience according to some fixed, preconceived notion of order which reaches across aesthetic, social and political categories. The reactionary possibilities of this approach are what lead to Barthes' bleak assertion, "the very end of myths is to im-

mobilise the world".³

Eliot's formula for the mythical method repeats certain rhetorical acts by which the once inconsequential concept of myth was brought from the margins of discourse to the centre of cultural debate. In this sense it is a perfect reflection of the natural history of mythology which, formerly identified with the aboriginal and heterodox underside of civilisation, later with the intellectually disenfranchised dissenting classes, came to be drawn from its base in a disinherited people into the central foundation of respectable ideas undergirding a liberal humanist outlook. This occurred because a number of different factors had combined to create a crisis of belief at the heart of industrial society, and myth was recruited as a means of revitalising the notion of a transcendental order regarded, so Eliot's remarks make clear, as essential for the functioning of a stable society.

The career of Robert Graves demonstrates that the use of myth in this way brought into the stronghold of English letters a deeply equivocal medium for understanding, and reacting to, the modern world. Graves indulged in no meta-critical reflections on the larger goals of his particular mythical method. But his work, along with that of perhaps a handful of other 20th-century writers, proves that myth provides an unstable framework, far less conservative than Eliot's argument would suggest, for composing the artist's picture of the world. Perhaps because of its association with the fringes of respectable thought, and the edges of the social order, myth is, to borrow a phrase of Mikail Bakhtin, more truly dialogic than some of its chief defenders and detractors assert, patient of many different and competing readings, some of which subvert the idea of order Eliot is championing. The most committed of Graves' writings use the mythical method to challenge the structures of authority, power and reason which dominate

industrial society in the name of a fullness of being to be found in a pre-scientific past, or at the edges of modern existence. We shall see that there are problems also with Graves' position, profound paradoxes which betray a complicity in the operations of that which he purports to reject, and which, perhaps, return us to that essential doubleness of myth. But that does not prevent us from seeing in Graves' writings the truth revealed that myth can be a vital ingredient in the creation of an adversary stance.

The difficulties which remain with Graves' version of the mythical method centre around the issue of obscurantism, which in turn can be tackled only by essaying something like a natural history of mythology - a task this chapter will go on to attempt. The question of obscurantism, like that of sincerity, is one of intentionality and regards enigmas of poetic practice which must be addressed.⁴ Obscurantism is a legitimate object of literary enquiry because the use of words is a moral enterprise, as we shall see, interwoven with the operations of authority.

When Randall Jarrell¹ called "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" "one of the most beautiful and mysterious poems of the century",⁵ he did not mean that it belonged to the occultists. Yet textual scholia and critical glosses upon this single poem have already achieved patrologian dimensions, and, in consequence, Graves scholarship has tended to become a record of overdetermined interpretation. The critic's job of illumination, of course, is particularly vexed when the poet has set out to puzzle him. Essays in the explication of Graves will frequently seem pedantic, because Graves is himself rather a pedant. To say, for example, that The White Goddess is not really "a historical grammar of poetic myth",⁶ but just a repository of recondite symbols⁷ for writing poetry, sidesteps the main issue and runs counter to Graves' explicit statement to that effect in his

subtitle. Yet anthropologists have never agreed on the significance of Graves' contribution to the study of myth. In a later chapter I shall analyse Graves' own theories more closely and try to show that the primaeval matriarchal culture which constituted the cornerstone of Graves' argument never, in fact, existed. When this conclusion is read back into the book it may cripple it for some readers. Helpful though it is to know this, a far touchier and more basic question arises from it. What are we to do with poetry which cannot be enjoyed in an intelligent way without a detailed knowledge of its mythic sources?

Once we have tracked down and comprehended a difficult allusion to some forgotten myth it may or may not turn out to enrich the poem we are reading. Much of the incunabula surrounding the Triple Muse passes the test brilliantly. But it also becomes clear fairly quickly that for all his zeal to recover for his readers a familiarity with myth, and although he does indeed create a vibrant image of "the ancient power of fright and lust", Graves is showing off. So Yeats before him showed off Rosicrucian symbolism and secondhand folklore, and so Pound strewed the later Cantos with private references and polyglot tags. But it is difficult to argue convincingly that an appreciation of, for example, the sequence "A Woman Young and Old" depends upon an understanding of the myth of Adonis. The power of the poem seems to be located entirely within its semantic boundaries and the myth, though illuminating, is also supererogatory. The same cannot be said of many of Graves' doctrinal poems which are fully incorporated into his use of mythology. Our reading of his verse, and our appreciation of his place in the 20th-century treatment of myth must take account of this fact.

"Allusion," I.A. Richards once wrote, "is a trap for the writer...It invites insincerity. It may encourage and disguise laziness. When

it becomes a habit it is a disease."⁸ His animadversions echo those of the positivist Muller who insisted, famously, that mythology was "a disease of language", a decadent process by which abstractions took on material reality.⁹ The positivist sees myth, or allusion to myth, as a distraction from the first purpose of language which is to express the triumph of reason over nature. Throughout his work we can see Graves suspicious of the properties of language which structure reality according to a pattern which fails to embrace the full breadth of human subjectivity.

Myth and allusion are forms of overcompensation. They have always seduced autodidacts and provincials - Irishmen, for example, or Americans. In the 18th-century cultural exile was a function of class, which included sect. The Dissenting artisan who went on to embrace Freemasonry, Swedenborgianism, or any other eccentric system had already been barred from the universities, the one route to intellectual catholicity. Genealogically and, if he was a Jacobin, politically, he descended from the Levelling peasant who had cursed the Norman yoke and whose accents still reverberate in Blake's suspicion of the Latin heritage. "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's"¹⁰ became the clarion-call of Blake's rejection of official, mainstream English letters, expressing his belief that an exile in discourse can be a genuine attempt to recreate a language freed from involvement in an unjust state of affairs. The perils are obvious. Although he detested Mystery for its own sake, Blake occasionally fulfilled the law according to which the small-businessman-turned-prophet speaks in tongues which he alone can understand.

The man on the fringe - the American or Irishman who is neither English nor a 'foreigner', the London clerk or Boston insurance agent who is neither learned nor unlettered - may choose to fly towards the centre. The history of literary expatriation in this century suggests

that the centre is not simply an elite but also the main access to Tradition. Alternatively, the outsider may run still further afield into shrill anti-establishment rhetoric or, if he is a symbolist, into the occult.

But the writer born in the centre, and as alien to it as was Robert Graves, is certain to seek the periphery. When any of these men tries to be academic he will sound cranky some of the time, for he will be at odds with the received idea while remaining its beneficiary. Above all - and this is crucial - his stance will resolve itself into the quandary of the liberal imagination, implicated in that which it is seeking to criticize. The mythical method performs this double loop in Graves' work: carrying him away from the sanction of mainstream culture while at the same time binding him by a tissue of allusion and reference to some of its deepest structures.

As the Modernist enthusiasm for myth becomes a fact of literary history eclipsed by later less reverential responses, and as the psycho-analytic fixation with myth as an access to the deep layers of the psyche disappears from the theorists' agenda, it is possible to essay a natural history of mythology free from the expectations of an earlier age. My purpose in this chapter is to chart the interrelationship between mythic narratives and the various models which have been employed to manipulate and make sense of them, from the theological systems of the ancients, to the anthropological theories of the early part of this century which form such a significant backdrop to the use of myth by many writers of the time. Of course, several of the anxieties which shape what Lyotard calls our present "Post-modern condition", such as worries about the stability of figural language, will doubtless influence my own approach. My aim is to understand more clearly the constellation of ideas which lent a context to the particular version of the mythical method employed by Robert Graves,

and to do this means, of course, applying a model of my own.

Mythogenesis

Mythogenies, attempts to understand the origins of particular myths, arise because of a failure to accept Malinowski's view that myths simply mean what they say.¹¹ Prehistorians will vouch for the difficulty of upholding Malinowski's position when they turn their sceptical attention to Palaeolithic societies, where evidence of sophisticated mythical thought is to be found, but where no properly constituted record remains of what these societies ever said or believed. The copious cave paintings of the basal Palaeolithic and the elaborate burial customs known to have existed suggest that the tribal communities of the Great Hunt possessed belief-systems of considerable complexity within which their day-to-day struggles for survival took on meaning and significance.

The fragmentary quality of the record, and the immense antiquity of the evidence make it impossible to reconstruct the world picture of this remote period of human development. However, the mythographer Joseph Campbell feels confident enough to postulate the existence of a number of "nuclear mythic images" at even this distant remove from civilization, "mythologems" which, he asserts, will go on to become the basic building blocks of the higher mythologies.¹² Campbell identifies from as early as the period of the Riss-Wurm interglacial era, c.100,000 BC, a continuum of basic images which originate in the totemistic practices of hunting tribes whose imprint in the mythic deposits takes the form of cave paintings, bone-shards and stone figurines.

The most prominent of these images revolve around the relationship between man and animals, and appear most frequently in the fabulous cave paintings dating from this time. The "Sorcerer of Trois Freres",

a painted figure from Lascaux combining aspects of deer, bear, owl, lion, wolf and man, is the best example of the series, his composition suggesting efforts by the early hunters to influence the outcome of the hunt by appropriating qualities of their prey. The boundary between the human and the non-human is not, in this extremely early phase, clearly defined. Human and animal qualities shift and merge, signs of the precarious relationship between man and his environment, and, to Campbell, the cave painting indicates unmistakably the presence of "hunting magic",¹³ the most overt manifestation of the urge to reach out to, and control, that environment.

Another important image from this period is expressed in the female figurines which fill the caves, such as the celebrated Venuses of Willendorf and Lespugue. These extravagantly curved statuettes occur in settings with the clear stamp of worship upon them, either in grottos surrounded by bone offerings from the hunt or in the burial grounds of the great mammoths. Campbell goes as far as to describe this female image as "Our Lady of the Mammoths"¹⁴ and connects it with the magical role of women in palaeolithic society. The concentration of the figurines upon the sexual and reproductive aspects of the female, including some which actually depict childbirth, suggests a strong symbolic attachment to the life-giving properties of woman. Their proximity to the tools and remains of the hunt further suggests an important magical role for women in presiding over rituals associated with the hunt.

Still another major source of nuclear mythic images in the Palaeolithic appears in the shamanistic practices for which the caves yield ample evidence. Carleton S. Coon traces a shift from the dominance of women in rites associated with the hunt, itself a relic of women's place within the still earlier planter phase of the Old Stone Age, to the rise of a male shaman figure indicative of the increasing

awareness in men of their paramount role in the hunt.¹⁵ As Lord of the Beasts the shaman not only becomes a new focus of magical practices for controlling the animal prey, he also becomes guardian of the tribes rites and beliefs. The process of creating a body of mythological knowledge has begun.

Corroboration of the existence and importance of these fundamental mythologems can be found in the mythologies of primitive communities which have survived into the modern world, such as the circumpolar tribes of the Arctic or the isolated equatorial peoples of South America. It is, of course, impossible to argue for continuity with ideas as ancient as these. But it is fair to assume that a constellation of shared motifs is present in the fragments of Palaeolithic evidence which have come down to us, and in the remarkably apposite stories these primitive communities tell themselves. Mircea Eliade brought together some of these stories in his researches, including litanies of the Kagaba people of Columbia to a universal mother goddess, and the famous myth of Hainuwele told by the Naskapi Indians of the Labrador Peninsula, which describes in detail the appearance and activities of the shaman Master of the Caribou.¹⁶

Shamanistic practices may be found worldwide among races who remain rooted in Stone Age lifestyles. The later work of Joseph Campbell has been an attempt to show that through the experiences of these "living peoples" access may be gained into the mythological patterns established by the earliest homo sapiens:

The history and geography of the rise and diffusion of specific myths and mythological systems can be readily reviewed in broad lines today and represented in such a way as to convert the rubble of the great moraine that is about us into a laboratory of revelations. For we have present...still among us, living representatives of many of the most typical or imposing of the rapidly disintegrating traditions of belief...even Stone Age tribesmen like the

Tasaday of the Philippines, the Bushmen of
the Kalahari, and the Nambikwara of Brazil.¹⁷

The shaman is the key figure in taking our understanding back to the threshold of the neolithic where we may speak, albeit tentatively, of the emergence of a mythological system. With the completion of the process of hominization, from Neanderthal to the first homo sapiens, animal sacrifices of totemistic societies point to certain clusters of ideas which entail supernatural beliefs. The basic notion seems to be that death does not exist, only a passing back and forth of an individual through a veil which separates two realms. Applied equally to man and beast, this belief finds its highest expression in the person of the shaman, who commutes freely between the two realms ensuring smooth commerce for the forces upon which the health and security of the tribe depend.

The version of this mythologem prevalent among the planter societies of the equatorial belt exhibits a deepening understanding of the transactions between life and death. The presence of human sacrifice and cannibalism in the archaeological record is supported by the lore of primitive tribes such as the Marindanim whose folktales attempt to explain such cruelties by reference to a mythological dream-time prior to the existence of life and death brought to an abrupt end by the procreative act. In their rituals, therefore, a pair of lovers united in sexual embrace are sacrificed and eaten; a rite which, according to Adolf Jensen, is inspired by the model of death and life in the plant world.¹⁸ The theme goes further than simply the passage of an immortal being through a veil over which the goddess or shaman presides. A profound complementarity is affirmed between not just birth and death, but sex and murder. The generation of mythological opposites has begun, pairs of opposites which are yet somehow identical, the willing acquiescence of an individual in his

own death, which is assumed into the pattern of binary opposition, and is therefore not really perceived as death.

The early agrarian settlers of the later neolithic built rapidly upon the basic mythologems of their Old Stone Age ancestors. A more sophisticated interaction between man and the natural world, typified in the evolution of the crop system, produced progressively more complex mythic images rooted in notions of death and rebirth which occur naturally to primitive cultivators. The central symbols of this phase became the serpent, the maiden and the garden, as is borne out by the folklore of contemporary primitive farming communities. Dependence upon the biological cycles of growth and decay and rebirth generated the symbolism of the serpent of eternal life, whose capacity for renewal made him an appropriate counterpart to the idea of woman as the magical portal to the other world - associations still clinging to her from earlier epochs. To these two nuclear mythic images were drawn several ancillary symbols such as the lunar cycle, the worship of water, and the passing and rising of the generations. On the threshold of that kind of organization we term civilization, human societies inhabiting several of the worlds 'mythogenetic zones', had developed, as their artefacts testify, all the raw materials from which the higher mythologies are descended.

Campbell is surely correct to suggest, then, that at even this early stage myth was, among other things, a means of regulating primitive societies.¹⁹ Campbell discerns three strands emerging in the proto-mythologies of the neolithic which he identifies as the pleasure principle, the power principle, and duty, or the lawful order. Myth provides a place in the symbolic order for the evaluation of sexual desire and procreative acts; it also expresses the triumph of human will over the natural environment; finally, it assimilates the individual into the structure of society, assigns him his place, and

establishes all the significant boundaries of his experience, underlining the permanence of the social institutions which impinge upon him. Once a primitive community has successfully evolved these three purposes it may be said to possess a fully-functioning mythology.

A fourth property of mythology may be discerned, however, in the embryonic belief-systems of the New Stone Age, one which by itself justifies our survey of the mythogenetic period. This is what Huizinga, speaking of later forms of social organization, was to term "homo ludens";²⁰ reliance upon the element of play which discloses the essence of the mythical perception of the world. For the individual participating either in the animal dances depicted so vividly in the cave paintings, or being inducted through story into the lore of the tribe, myth introduces a superordinated principle of release from the ego-obsessions of the self and their corresponding social imperatives. Sociobiological urges to enjoy and control are overcome by the experience of rapture which removes the individual from these confines.

The ecstatic, transcendental thrust of mythology exists in tension with its socializing function, pointing once again to that essential doubleness of myth. Myth may be a means of consolidating the social order while at the same time providing a medium for escaping from, and subverting, it. Competition between these two impulses remains a feature of the most sophisticated mythological systems.

Civilization and Myth

The structuring, ordering properties of myth, found in inchoate form among the peoples of the Stone Age, are much more fully in evidence among the hieratic city states which emerged in the Fertile Crescent around 4000 BC. The market towns of the later neolithic steadily assumed a more urban and corporate character reinforced by the emer-

gence of bodies of religious doctrine set down for the first time in writing, and by the practices of an organized cultus.

In these hieratic city states the functions of the shaman had been absorbed by a highly developed priesthood which exercised wide control over the political and religious life of the community, carefully containing the ecstatic elements of mythological experience within the boundaries of prescribed rituals and periods. Historians of mythology vouch for the crucial importance of myth at this stage in binding together and harmonizing the disparate sections of the state. A priestly elite had created many of the organizing principles by which civilization was to differentiate itself from nature: the rudiments of astronomy and the inventory of the seven planets; the decimal and sexigesimal number systems; the three-hundred-and-sixty-day cycle of the year, the five intercalated days representing an opening through which spiritual energy flowed from the pleroma of eternity into the temporal round; the seven-day week.

The underlying theme of this outlook is, as John A. Wilson observed, that "the natural and the supernatural are of one substance"²¹ and that the role of the human agent is to recognize and pay homage to that substance which, in turn, maintains the balance of the cosmos. The myth of the killing of the chaos-dragon, prominent in all of the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, sets in narrative form, probably to a dramatic accompaniment, the fundamental tractability of the universe, the extent to which it falls within intelligible control. "The whole elaborate pattern of activities was designed to secure the well-being of the community," writes S.H. Hooke, "by controlling the incalculable forces by which man found himself surrounded."²²

This rage for order, which invested a hieratic priest-caste with tremendous authority, had a corollary which highlights the capacity

of myth to conserve and perpetuate. Observation of the laws governing the cosmos led inexorably to the organization of society along lines which imitated the universal harmony which the study of nature through the prism of mythology disclosed. It is in the city-states of this initial zone of civilization that anthropologists can discern the origins of the sacred, which depended for its force upon a well-established body of myths controlled and interpreted by priestcraft. The sacred was the medium through which heaven and earth were joined. The celestial order observed by the priests became a model for building a society of coordinated wills, with its human focus upon the king as the representative of the sacred order, and its architectural focus upon the palace or ziggurat, the pivot linking heaven and earth, around which the mathematically-regulated life of the community went on from year to year. The whole city, based around the temple compound, came to be seen, in imitation of the cosmic pattern, as a kind of middle realm, a mesocosm uniting the microcosm of the individual to the macrocosm of an intuited universal order. The extent to which the expression of this unity entailed the use of myth to shape individual and communal awareness is accurately summed up by Thorkild Jacobsen:

To the Mesopotamian, accordingly, cosmic order became something achieved - achieved through a continual integration of the many individual cosmic wills, each so powerful, so frightening. His understanding of the cosmos tended therefore to express itself in terms of integration of wills, that is, in terms of social orders such as the family, the community, and, most particularly, the state. To put it succinctly, he saw the cosmic order as an order of wills - as a state. 23

The normative function of myth within the earliest urban communities known to man carefully regulated the ecstatic, transcendental impulse which we identified earlier as a component of mythological

experience. That an aboriginal mythic system existed alongside the hieratic, in the areas surrounding the city states of the Fertile Crescent we can be fairly certain, though it has left only obscure remains in the mythological record. It may be that the many Mesopotamian stories of the revolt of the young gods against the old tell in coded form of the suppression of the populist archaic cults of the Near East by the higher theologies of the city-states. We can be sure that the development of writing effectively effaced the mythologies of the region's preliterate peoples. The ability to make permanent written records begins a process of differentiation in the natural history of mythology whereby the official, ruling mythology is inscribed in the religious annals of civilization while the suppressed cults of subject groups are erased or else left in the less secure grasp of oral tradition.

The achievement of the hieratic city-states shows the triumph of the pedagogical, juridical principle of mythology at the expense of its antinomian characteristics. From the dawn of civilization on into the heyday of the world religions and beyond, myth continued to be affected by this fracture which on the one side allied it with authority and law, and, on the other side, drew it towards the deviant and unorthodox, releasing spiritual forces which undermined the established belief system. The great mythographer Dr Henri Frankfort, who introduced to this debate the notion that "mythopoeic thought" constituted a form of associational awareness uniquely native to the primitive mind and rooted in "the conviction that the divine was immanent in nature",²⁴ argued that the first function of myth outlined above held sway in the ancient world until the Ionian philosophers of sixth-century BC Greece first started to question the cosmic edifice raised by their forebears.²⁵ Pre-Socratic reflection began, according to Frankfort, "the emancipation of thought from myth" because it

pursued the idea of the intelligibility of the universe by examining its internal coherence, a coherence of things, rather than by simply submitting to the operations of a celestial order before which man was expected to remain reverentially silent:

...the Ionian philosophers gave their attention to the problem of origins; but for them it assumed an entirely new character. The origin...which they sought was not understood in the terms of myth. They did not describe an ancestral divinity or a progenitor. They did not even look for an 'origin' in the sense of an initial condition which was superseded by subsequent states of being. The Ionians asked for an immanent and lasting ground of existence... 'origin' not as 'beginning', but as 'sustaining principle' or 'first cause'.²⁶

This is not to say that the Pre-Socratics were suddenly free from reliance upon supernatural explanation, as the attempts by Heraclitus and Thales to universalize the principles of fire and water will confirm. But the nature of their work "ignored with astonishing boldness the prescriptive sanctities of religious representation".²⁷ A paradigm shift occurred with this development because it rejected the absolute truth-claims of myth in favour of what was, broadly speaking, an allegorical reading of the mythic narratives. Thales continued to use the mythological material which Homer had mined, but he strove to interpret the myth of Oceanus in strictly abstract terms, as revealing a truth about the origin of living things from water. In the Pre-Socratics, writing barely two centuries after Hesiod had compiled his masterful account of the origins of gods and men, all talk of gods and goddesses ends, replaced by cosmological speculation.

It is difficult to ascertain how representative was this strand of thought in ancient Greek civilization. Controversy continues to surround the topic of classical Greek religion and whether or not

the Greeks actually 'believed' in their gods.²⁸ Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that early in the Classical period the Olympian pantheon and its surrounding corpus of fabulous tales were regarded by the educated elite less as objects of piety and more as the raw material for philosophical reasoning. The original Olympians took on a distinctly decadent cast which left their worship to become little more than a sign of participation in the identity of the family, the tribe or the state. Membership of the pantheon was itself a consequence of inter-tribal and inter-cultic struggles which it became the function of the mythic narratives to paper over. The arrival of new and vigorous cults would produce a proportionate adjustment to the shape of the pantheon which it then became the job of the storytellers to encode in the language of myth.

The religious life of the lower orders, the slave classes, and rural peasantry, is still more difficult to reconstruct. There is some historical evidence for the existence of popular cults with strong animistic, even shamanistic, overtones. The cult of the boy-god Dionysus Zagreus seized the popular imagination of a discontented rural population, spread like wildfire through Asia Minor and Thrace, and created enough social upheaval to secure the admission of his worship and festivals into the Olympian theology.²⁹ But this is not typical of the fate of popular religion in ancient Greece. Despite tantalizing allusions to their vestigial remnants, genuinely chthonic mythic traditions are impossible to recover, suggesting that the dominant Hellenic culture maintained a strict religious orthodoxy among the urban classes, promulgated chiefly through the temple cults. Myths and mythopoeic thought dissolved into this orthodoxy to create out of religious belief a powerful social institution. Of this process even a conservative scholar like G.S. Kirk can acknowledge: "Greek myths...were reduced to a system. Even the divine myths appear to

form some kind of coherent whole, at least on the biographical level. One result of the systematizing was the disappearance of nearly all problematic overtones."³⁰ The edifice of belief was used as an imposing feature of the civic apparatus to regulate the life of the community according to an eternal economy distilled from the mythology but which then left the mythology largely redundant. Kirk also notes

In the fifth century BC, the age of Pindar, the tragedians, Pericles and Socrates, there were indeed many attacks on the gods...Most people however continued to perform their private devotions and take part in the great public festivals...The traditional myths, after all, were the dominant cultural fact of Greek life. They provided the primary subject-matter of literature ...they were the mainstay of education, appeal to them was constantly made by politicians and persuaders of every kind...³¹

Behind the rise of religious formalism in ancient Greece, the displacement of the gods from the affective life of its most influential citizens, lay the increasing prestige accorded rationalism and the philosophical method. The classicist Wilhelm Nestle saw in this, quite explicitly, "the progressive replacement of mythological by rational thinking among the Greeks."³² Subjecting myths to ridicule or 'scientific' investigation became the chief means for thinkers such as Hecataeus, Xenophanes or Heraclitus, of attacking the inherited theology in the name of reason. As the religious life of sixth-and fifth-century BC Greece settled into a decadence based on little more than cursory observance by the educated classes, it appeared that myth had served its purpose and could sink into the background of philosophical reflection.

However, if we are to search for areas of Greek life where some of the "problematic overtones" of myth remained, where emancipated mythic thought might be seen questioning this great rational edifice which

the philosophers were devising, it is to the dark underside of their religious activities that we must turn. It is in the obscene liturgies and blasphemous theologies of the mystery cults that release from the imprisoning power of the state religion is to be found. A revitalized current of mythological speculation asserted itself in the ceremony of these cults, and a radical reworking of the traditional heritage of mythology produced new narratives, outrageous misreadings of the received stories which generated fresh and totally heterodox strains of mythopoeic thought at odds with some of the fundamental convictions of the classical temper.

Chief among these profane sects, which acted as incubators of new mythopoeic thought a wholly unparalleled experience of the sacred, were the Pythagoreans and Orphics. With Pythagoras the traditional Greek distinction between rational soul and body was further divided into a split between the rational soul, psyche, and an occult self, or daemon,² alien to both the body and the whole material dimension. Pythagorean teaching, enshrined in the learning of the cults, dwelt upon the transmigration of this occult self from being to being as it struggled to free itself from dependence upon corrupt matter. The ancestry of these beliefs in an earlier Indo-European shamanism which passed from Scythia to Asiatic Greece and so into the city-states, is attested by E.R. Dodds, whose ground-breaking researches first highlighted the importance of the cults as vehicles of a belief structure antithetical to the philosophers' devotion to reason.³³

The doctrines of the Orphic schools, whose most celebrated acolyte was the repentant philosopher-turned-shaman, Empedocles, developed the teachings of Pythagoras into what became a fundamental reorientation of the classical mind. Inverting one of the basic insights of Greek civilization, the Orphics taught that man, in the person of his occult self, was not truly at home in the cosmos, but rather an exile whose

true mantic identity was hidden from him by the machinations of a material world perceived to be utterly corrupt, a viewpoint which represented another alteration of the classical perspective. Dodds enlarges on this by saying:

...these beliefs prompted in their adherents a horror of the body and a revulsion against the life of the senses which were quite new in Greece ...it was the impact of shamanistic beliefs which set the process going...In that form of the doctrine which Plato attributes to the Orphic school, the body was pictured as the soul's prison, in which the gods keep it locked up until it has purged its guilt.³⁴

Purgation from guilt, according to Orphic wisdom, was arrived at by the acquisition of a redemptive knowledge, knowledge of the inner occult self and its special destiny. Accounting for the daemon's involvement with the wickedness of an alien cosmos compelled the Orphics to revamp some of the darker chthonic mythologies slumbering in the substrata of Greek thought, and this is what awakened, at the heart of Classical Greece, the specifically antinomian and atavistic properties of myth.

The Orphics built their theodicy primarily upon a regressive version of the myth of Dionysus. In their shamanistic traditions, which reworked the basic elements of the old fertility cult, the primal sin was the slaying, cooking, and devouring of the infant god Dionysus by the wretched ancestors of humanity, the Titans, whom Zeus, in his anger, destroyed by a thunderbolt, but from the smoke of whose remains sprang the human race. Man, then, inherits both the primal guilt of the Titans, but also a fragment of the divine soul-substance which it is the purpose of the mysteries to liberate. The cults impart to the initiates the knowledge of their condition required to help them overcome the obstacles placed by a recalcitrant cosmos in the way of their salvation.

The mystery cults released into the higher religions of the ancient world a flood of nuclear mythic images. In taking the old Dionysiac ritual of the Sparagmos and Omophagia and transforming it into the myth of the Titans, the Orphic hierophants answered a deep need in a populace excluded from all but the trappings of religious experience. They diminished the distance between men and gods, actually having the audacity to proclaim that their initiates' manumission from the wheel of rebirths raised them to a divine status. Their mythopoeic thinking challenged the dominant alliance of myth, law and philosophy which commanded the loyalty of the Panhellenic educated elite. It revitalised areas of affective response in its supporters with far-reaching consequences for the social order and the intellectual superstructure it had raised. The hostility to reason and a distant, impersonal, worn-out religious system grew into a whole movement of feeling which at last began to turn against the rational outlook on the world, in the end bringing about a gradual yet, as we have seen, fundamental alteration in the disposition of the classical mind.

It is common for classicists to lament this shift from reason back to older forms of thought governed by the workings of mythology. The persecution of philosophers, the enthusiasm for magic, the spread of orgiastic cults, the fascination with astrology, and the outbreaks of popular animism all point once again to that tension between the several roles of myth in society. However we are to assess finally the changes which turned the civilized world away from reason to mystery, whether as a deplorable failure of nerve, or as the release of man from restrictive accounts of his nature, we cannot avoid recognizing in the Orphic claim that man's "is a magical, not a rational self that has to be cleansed",³⁵ a profoundly unsettling revision of the relations between myth and civilization, with untold possibilities.

The Orthodox and the Heterodox

Dodds is unequivocal in concluding that "the rise of the medieval world view" can be traced directly to the collapse of rationalism at the end of the classical period.³⁶ What we can see in a basic form in the tension between the use of myth by the mystery cults and its treatment by the philosophical religion of the state, is the confrontation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. For the student of mythology this is indicative of a clash between two responses to myth which in actual fact reveals a structural property of myth itself, particularly in its relationship to social institutions. Any mythology may be used to underwrite a particular episteme, to conserve and transmit the tribe's world view, the knowledge of its founding moments, its place in nature, and its internal organization. Indeed, as Campbell insists, this is one of its essential features.³⁷ We are led back to Barthes' simple yet penetrating axiom "the very end of myths is to immobilise the world."

Yet the case of the mystery religions, whether in the last analysis we judge it pejoratively or not, alerts us to the capacity of myth to carry us back to the dreamtime of the primal scene, a mythical moment of pre-social, pre-rational identity, rich in psychic possibilities. Here the self is anterior to any social construction of reality, a piece of the divine substance. Personality inhabits what anthropology terms the realm of mana, an area of impersonal supernatural force unconditioned by the restrictions of time or space. A sceptical social thinker might see in this nothing but a delusional escapist syndrome refusing the difficulties of living in the modern world. But the language-games of myth, and the forms of consciousness to which they give rise have, according to this argument, a direct impact upon material things, disrupting, subverting, defamiliarising the totalizing accounts of reality inscribed in the operations of

the ruling orthodoxy. The very end of such myths is to transform the world.

The measures by which Christianity became a state, and then an international, religion released many of the same tensions between the authoritarian tendencies of the institution and the exercise of psycho-mythological powers by heterodox groups and individuals. From the outset, Christianity, as the magisterial study of the period by Robin Lane Fox makes clear,³⁸ made bold efforts to distinguish itself from the blasphemies of the mystery cults, which it regarded as the most abiding seat of opposition to its growth. Conflict between Christian and Pagan ideas was drawn frequently towards the issue of myth, as Pagan critics strove to show that Christianity was based upon another rival, yet wholly derivative, narrative of the dying-and-rising-god theme. Christian reaction to this attack, in, for example, Origen's response to Celsus, began by employing the familiar classical argument that "Myths had lost their surface meaning for sophisticated minds."³⁹ Christian authors debated the myths in the absence of any cultic reverence because, for them, "Literal myth was irrelevant to practice and its credit was preserved by seeing it as an allegory."⁴⁰ Irenaeus and Tertullian were unimpressed by parallels to the Christian story in Pagan traditions.

Within its native setting in the Near East, where the life of the mystery cults was felt most keenly, Christianity soon came to dissociate itself from the complex of mythological themes which lent the cults their potency. Despite the affinities of its central narratives with the mythic traditions of, in particular, the fertility cults, such as the rites of Attis and Cybele, the Great Church, as it was known to its enemies, sought to set its beliefs on the same plane as the higher philosophical religions, eschewing the atavistic trappings of the mysteries. Part of the reason for this lay in Christ-

ianity's roots in the abstract monotheism of Judaism. Part lay in the changing intellectual milieu of the classes in which the new faith prospered. There was plenty of precedent for it. For, as A.D. Nock pointed out some time ago, under the Pax Romana a generalised notion of divine power, including the spread of a tacit monotheism, began to supersede the idea of discrete divinities.⁴¹

This change, as far as we can tell, was confined to a small sector of the Hellenized civic classes, but it soon became the central means by which Christianity stressed its respectability and uniqueness. The Acts of the Apostles recounts several episodes where disciples refuse to have their message understood in mythical terms, most famously when Paul and Barnabas rebuke the citizens of Lystra for acclaiming them as the gods Zeus and Hermes after some healing miracles have occurred.

It is important for us to recognize that from the Apostolic Age down to the end of the Empire, by which time it was the state religion, Christianity developed in a world where mythological thought was tremendously potent, particularly among the middle and lower classes. People shrank before the anger of the gods, they appeased the souls of the dead, they propitiated the oracles in times of crisis, they solicited the guidance of prophets and wonder-workers, they believed that the gods often walked incognito in the midst of men. Many would claim to have seen a god at the climactic moments of the festivals.⁴²

In the midst of this kind of religious sensitivity, and despite superficial resemblances, the Great Church steadfastly resisted urges either to promote itself using the techniques of secrecy native to the mysteries, or to present its main creed in the language of myth. The whole thrust of the argument of the early apologists, against the accusations levelled at the Church, stressed the openness, the accessibility of the beliefs, and, of course, the equality of human

beings in the economy of salvation. Ultimately, as Fox emphasises, Christianity took its stand on history, not myth.⁴³ There was no dream-time, no secrets, no magic, only what believers regarded as the hard facts of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth who "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and was buried." The results for those who did attempt to join theurgical elements to the doctrines of the faith were made plain in the fate of Montanus and his sisters, among the first baptized Christians on record to be branded with the title heretic.

The only serious mythopoeic challenge to the doctrinal dominance of the Great Church came out of the religious ferment of second-century Alexandria, in the form of the Gnostic speculations, particularly those of the enigmatic thinker Valentinus. A huge upsurge of interest in Gnostic thought spurred on in part by recent textual discoveries and in part also, it seems, by the dilemmas of our own age, has succeeded in uncovering enormously rich deposits of mythopoeic creativity in the major Gnostic writings.⁴⁴

The obscene creation myths of the Gnostics display an immense imaginative range, bringing into the scope of their beliefs elements from Judaism, Orphism, Platonism and Christianity, their chief antagonist. The literary critic Harold Bloom has seen in what he calls "the mythopoeic power" of Valentinus' greatest writing, The Gospel of Truth, the first example in Western literature of the deliberate misreading of the corpus of Judaeo-Christian and Classical cosmogonies and the myths in which they are couched.⁴⁵ Other Pagan philosophies, principally that of the Neoplatonists, challenged the validity of the Christian 'myth's' account of the relationship between the divine and the human. But Valentinian gnosis goes much further.

In The Gospel of Truth, and elsewhere in the fragments ascribed to Valentinus and his followers, we find gnostic mythopoesis concocting

wholly new myths of creation and fall which are monstrous parodies of their prototypes in Jewish, Christian and Greek theology. For the Gnostics, creation and fall are simultaneous events, part of a single catastrophe which occurs because of degradation within the Godhead itself. The botched creation, in which sparks of the pre-cosmic divine unity are imprisoned within matter, is the work of a blind, deluded demiurge, himself an aspect of the Godhead alienated from its own being. Gnostic fall, therefore, is within the Godhead, and not just from it. Valentinian theology, or rather anti-theology, goes on to interpret Christ as the messenger of the damaged alien Godhead whose links with his own lost fragments are obscured by the machinations of the demiurge. It is the demiurge, masquerading as the tyrannical Allfather of the Jewish scriptures, who destroys Jesus, though Jesus' 'knowledge' of his ultimate origins ensures his restoration to new life.

The appeal of Valentinian gnosticism lay essentially in its account of evil which was much more audacious than anything essayed in Greek or Christian thought. To present the material cosmos as a hostile realm controlled by a blind, malevolent deity without this collapsing into simple dualism successfully disposed of the problem of suffering for many. Of course Plotinus, the gnostics' greatest pagan opponent could spot the weakness:

To those who assert that creation is the work of the Soul "after the failing of its wings," we answer that no such disgrace could overtake the Soul of the All. If they tell us of its falling, they must tell us also what caused the fall. And when did it take place? If from eternity, then the Soul must be essentially a fallen thing: if at some one moment, why not before that?⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the myth-making capabilities of Valentinianism deferred this philosophical question by appealing to that same magical account

of human nature, to the individual's sense of his own 'occult self' that had sustained the Orphics. Hans Jonas summarises the procedure thus:

...knowledge...assumes an ontological status for exceeding any merely moral and psychological importance granted to it; and the redemptional claim made on its behalf in all gnostic religion receives here a metaphysical grounding in the doctrine of total existence which makes it convincingly the sole and sufficient vehicle of salvation, and this salvation in each soul a cosmic event. For if not only the spiritual condition of the human person but also the very existence of the universe is constituted by the results of ignorance...then every individual illumination by "knowledge" helps to cancel out again the total system sustained by that principle; and, as such knowing finally transposes the individual self to the divine realm, it also plays its part in integrating the impaired godhead itself.⁴⁷

In an extreme version of the release from ego-dependence that we discussed earlier, the gnostic myth asserts that

...the human-individual event of pneumatic knowledge is the inverse equivalent of the pre-cosmic universal event of divine ignorance, and in its redeeming effect of the same ontological order. The actualization of knowledge in the person is at the same time an act in the general ground of being.⁴⁸

Thus expressed, the Valentinian mythos articulated the fullest gnostic critique of revealed religion, and established its rivalry to the soteriological scheme of Christianity. The details of its mythological scheme - the story of the fall into error of the divine principle Sophia, or Wisdom, and the creation of the Primal Man - need not detain us. The three important things to recognize are, first, the outburst of antithetical opinion for which this mythology provided a vehicle; secondly, the renewed appeal which it prompted to the sense of an occult self; thirdly, the polarisation to which

it led between an emergent, essentially demythologized, orthodoxy and a subversive underground belief-system rooted in entirely alien, and more ancient, ways of thinking.

I cannot, therefore, agree with the historian Jeffrey Russell's point that the Christian conflict with Gnosticism simply represents in accentuated form the story of the Church's relations with Paganism generally.⁴⁹ It seems to me that the element of deliberate mythopoeic misreading, what Joel Fineman terms "textual violation",⁵⁰ by, in particular, the Valentinians, embodied a qualitatively superior, and thus more serious, challenge to the absolutist claims of the Church.

It is, however, possible to endorse Russell's larger insight into the missionary extension of the Church through the Pagan civilizations of Europe and the Levant.⁵¹ By a shrewd combination of assimilation and suppression, the Christian faith rapidly overcame the obstacles placed in the way of its growth by the official structures of paganism. But relations between Christianity and paganism were conducted at many different levels. Dissolution of the heavenly, uranic cults was much more easily accomplished than the eradication of the chthonic mythologies which persisted in the lower strata of society. With the extinction of Gnosticism, the decadence of the old civic cults was exposed and Christianity could quite logically move to fill the spiritual vacuum. The collapse of the Western Empire served only to hasten this process largely because Christianity had by that time become so closely identified with the network of urban and intellectual centres which did much to preserve the fabric (and the idea) of civilization in the subsequent eras of upheaval. The stamp of Imperial authority had attached itself firmly to the Church making its mystique attractive to the barbarian warrior-aristocracies.⁵²

Driven underground and then more or less eradicated from the urban centres, the mystery cults became barely distinguishable from

the chthonic mythologies which continued to flourish in the countryside, in communities that lived by agriculture and the hunt. Perhaps part of the reason for this resemblance lay in the deposits of genuinely archaic material, derived from the shamanistic seams, which formed the original bedrock of the mystery religions. Aboriginal cults, folk traditions and low magic combined to produce an underground mythology which persisted in spite of Christianization and beneath the official workings of the Church. Ecclesiastical response was to demonize the chthonic deities and their accompanying mythology, a manoeuvre which proscribed residual paganism and, at the same time, incorporated it into the Christian theological scheme.

The closed-system orthodoxy of the Church succeeded in creating a metaphysical space for these remnants of paganism within which their mythology could be contained. Labelling the popular deities 'demons' was an effective way of acknowledging their ubiquity without accepting the existence of a rival religious system. But it is doubtful whether even these measures succeeded in diminishing the influence of the pagan survivals over the peasant classes. Chthonic paganism was deeply attuned to the movement of the seasons and the fluctuations of light, growth and fertility upon which the lives of the rural population depended. Seasonal festivals were a large part of their appeal to the popular imagination because, as comparative studies show, these festivals linked the wellbeing of the community to supernatural powers invested in the land who could be propitiated, solicited, or directed in some specific way. Pagan ritual, bolstered by a largely oral mythology, connected its participants much more immediately than Christianity with that strange, impersonal realm of mana, mysterious influences from which were felt to be active in the land, its fertility and its inhabitants. Patterns of belief like this were sure to endure so long as the material conditions of peasant

life remained unchanged, altering only in relation to the external perceptions of the official Church. Hence the introduction of a demonological perspective by the Church provided a vital catalyst in transforming this phenomena into the foundations of witchcraft. "The witches' sabbath may," noted Runeberg, "thus be explained as an esoteric form of those pagan fertility rites which survived in Western Europe centuries after the official introduction of Christianity."⁵³

Heterodox mythologies withstood for a long time the pressures of Christianity. Well into the emergence of medieval society Christian synods were pronouncing against widespread pagan practices and beliefs. Chthonic mythologies became the seat of covert resistance to the authority of the Church. In its most extreme forms this resistance took the shape of the various heresies which plagued the Church. Frequently, these heresies gathered up pagan elements in popular belief and allied them to more exotic mythologies from religions which ante-dated Christianity. The most radical example of this kind of synthesis appeared in the heresy of the Cathars. Catharism merged dualist gnostic tendencies from the Levant with the popular paganism then flourishing in southern Europe to produce a powerful mythology and cult which recapitulated the occult testimony of the mystery religions.

The heresy spread like wildfire throughout the region of Languedoc. The explanation of its appeal is complex, but an important and often overlooked aspect of it is the vehicle it provided for social unrest. The deliberately heterodox mythology of the Cathars, like that of their gnostic forebears, condemned the world as unmitigatedly evil and its authorities as corrupt. It laid upon its adherents a contempt for the powers of Church and State, setting itself up in rival and oppositional relation to the ruling orthodoxy and the vested instit-

utions it underwrote. In Catharism the mythology of the occult self expressed a powerful, indeed revolutionary, response to the theological and political dominance of the established order of things. Alarmed as much by its socially disruptive implications as by its doctrines, the Church launched Christendom's one and only internal Crusade, putting Languedoc to the sword. Fire and death guaranteed the rights of the orthodox.

Henry Adams was the first to describe this phase of Western civilization as the beginning of "the movement from unity into multiplicity."⁵⁴ Following his lead, Joseph Campbell has seen in Catharism not simply the death throes of the mystery religions, but also the birth-pangs of a genuinely modern mythic sensibility.⁵⁵ By this he means that Catharism was the most concrete expression of forces at work in Christendom which activated new and vibrant forms of mythic thinking. Campbell notes that "Throughout the history of the Christian cult, the liability of its historicized symbols to reinterpretation in some general mythological sense has been a constant danger."⁵⁶ From a combination of factors such as contact with the pagan legacy of the Near East, the rediscovery of Celto-Germanic lore, the cult of love, the attenuation of scholasticism, Campbell believes that an individualised creative mythology was conceived in direct opposition to the "collective mythology" of the Church. The presence of this new flowering of mythic thought came to be inscribed in various subtexts of the Christian orthodoxy, Arthurian Romance, for example, or the apophatic theology of Eckhart, or alchemy. But it found its most dramatic expression in the heresy of the Cathars where it disputed the 'collective' view that "myth is patterned by authority, not emergent from life...there is no poet's eye to see, no adventure to be lived, where all is set for all and forever..."⁵⁷

We need not accept uncritically Campbell's view of the stagnation

of Christian, and specifically medieval, thought to appreciate his emphasis upon the undercurrents of antithetical belief which raged beneath it, steadily eroding its foundations. What it is important for us to recognize if we are to understand the problematic place of myth in civilization is the presence of heterodox belief in the midst of a supervening orthodoxy, taking the form of a popular, enduring paganism rooted in nature-worship, and a more organized recycling of nuclear mythic images by the great heresiarchs.

The extent to which these channels of mythopoeic thought succeeded in penetrating the upper echelons of the dominant belief-system, especially that of the intellectuals responsible for consolidating a Christian philosophy, is debated heatedly. There can be no doubt that recent scholarship has depicted a far less normative pattern of Christian belief than was hitherto understood to be the case. The anthropologist Edward Peters sees notions about the veracity of magical practices gaining ground throughout the medieval period, despite official condemnation.⁵⁸ It appears that common assumptions about the supernatural in late antiquity were not disputed by the Church, only evaluated differently. Even the theory of the occult self finds its way into the hinterland of orthodox reflection via the psychological and spiritual transformations sought by the alchemists. Peters is hesitant towards connecting so-called 'high magic' with the pagan folkways of the peasantry: "At the core of an episode there may well once have been a popular practice, but in written form the "popular" elements have been transformed into a literary work."⁵⁹

Certainly our model of the interactions of the popular and the official can be taken too far. In her various writings, the 'twenties anthropologist Margaret Murray, whose work we shall examine in more detail in a later chapter, tried desperately to discern in the cultic

practices and superstitions of the peasantry, such as the legends of Robin Hood, the lineaments of the "Old Religion", a highly organized subterranean pagan 'church' flourishing among the European peasantry, and defined by the authorities as witchcraft.⁶⁰ Her once fashionable theories are now discredited for want of any real evidence. Nevertheless, in his massive study of the place of magic in medieval and early modern society, though strictly out of sympathy with Murray's hypothesis, Keith Thomas documents in painstaking detail the ways in which the powers of sacrament, saint and priest tended towards debasement at the popular level, including that of the clerics, where they were used talismanically to ameliorate the circumstances of earthly existence.⁶¹

We need not argue, as Murray did, for the existence of a counter-Christian faith flowering in hill and cave to be made fully aware of important tensions in our civilization generated by the human capacity to breathe new life into old myths. Historical anthropology confirms the presence of a strong residual pagan base at the bottom of the edifice of Christendom which became the seed-bed of new and vital outgrowths of mythopoesis. Moreover, we can also conclude that in some of its more extreme manifestations, such as the great heretical movements of the middle ages, this alternative outlook offered its adherents "escape from the bonds of worldly unrighteousness and inadequacy, in order to attain godly purity."⁶² The natural history of these mythologies does not always and inevitably represent a turning-in of the self on its own elite consciousness; or, if it does, this is only a prelude to an engagement with the world and, especially, with those institutions of the world order which harbour life-denying accounts of human nature. There is a definite sense in which the dialectic between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is also a dialectic between permanence and change. And metamorphosis, as Nietzsche reminded us,

is the first function of myth.⁶³

Speculative Mythology

Interest in the uranic, celestial side of the pagan heritage followed naturally from the reverence Christendom felt towards the achievements of antiquity. Regardless of the presence beneath them of barely-concealed chthonic practices, or of the presence in their midst of the allure of high magic, Christian scholars had no qualms about subjecting the mythology of the ancients to careful scrutiny. Guidance for this came from St Paul's remark in Romans 15:4 "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning." It was also endorsed by the widespread assumption that, since Moses was the first author, Greek thought must ultimately derive from Hebrew, and therefore contain at least vestiges of the truth.

Allegoresis became the favoured trope for (mis)reading the myths of antiquity, partly because it was a method employed in antiquity itself, and partly because it prepared the text according to principles laid down by orthodoxy, in this case those of Christian morality. Allegoresis as a means of creating retroactive meaning was evident in Christian dogmatics from the Apostolic Age onwards. St Paul himself employed it to marshal the texts of the Old Testament under the interpretative scheme of the new dispensation. For example, he told the Galatians (4.22-31) that the Genesis story of Abraham and his two sons, "one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman" (Gen.21) was really an allegory of the two covenants of Law and Grace. Similarly, Augustine could interpret the role of the Good Samaritan as referring to the destiny of the Church; and, most famously, Origen could struggle to accomodate the Song of Songs to Christian theology by seeing it as an allegory of Christ's love for his Church.

The process by which texts are invested with a secret or spiritual

meaning beneath their literal or surface one is germane to the study of allegory, especially when the texts so conceived advert to a rival philosophical and religious system.⁶⁴ Occasionally, allegorical readings by Christian thinkers were accompanied by Euhemerism which reduced the myths to corrupt records of historical truth. The practice is most evident in the work of medieval and early Renaissance writers such as Isidore of Seville or Ado of Vienne who regarded antique heroes as real historical figures, founders of dynasties or professions, or great leaders. But allegory superseded Euhemerism as the principle trope with which to respond to myth because it lent itself so readily to moralising. The Ovide Moralise and its associated writings brought the whole celestial panorama of Greek myths into the orbit of Christian letters by using the higher mythologies for didactic purposes. The myths were used to illustrate the cardinal virtues, depict the exercise of those virtues, and ruminate on the sad fates of those who neglected them. Hence the choice of Hercules at the crossroads was seen as an allegory of wisdom: choosing the path of moderation rather than those of excess or abstinence.

Late medieval and early Renaissance thinkers employed the allegoresis of myth, though, for diverse purposes, not all of them didactic. More 'spiritualised' readings were possible to those who saw moral dogmatics as a trivial distraction from the real potency of myths, and who were equipped with the categories of Neoplatonic philosophy with which to break down the secrets encoded in the myths. This kind of hermetic language is not out of place in discussing the approach of medieval and Renaissance humanism to myth. "Let us note," points out Jean Seznec, "...that when the humanists had once begun trying to read the riddles hidden beneath the surface of fable, they were tempted to implant ideas of their own there in turn."⁶⁵ Dorat, Politian, Ficino all encouraged their followers to conceal truth behind a cloak

of myth. That truth consisted, simply, of the then dominant cosmology, Neoplatonism, which many of the humanists believed antedated its major exponent, Plotinus, and was indeed the essence of Greek philosophy, distilled into the figurative language of classical myth: "...in the light of Neoplatonism, the humanists discovered in mythology something other and much greater than a concealed morality: they discovered religious teaching..."⁶⁶

Within the school of Neoplatonism there were shades of opinion which ranged from orthodox attempts to discern the lineaments of Christian theology in the writings of antiquity, to those with more unsettling views who found in the myths a religious teaching difficult to reconcile with orthodoxy. Besides, the works of Plotinus, Porphyry and the pseudo-Dionysus only rarely alluded to the myths - less often, in fact, than Plato himself had used them to illustrate his ideas. Many thinkers inhabited a theological borderland where their speculations threatened constantly to come adrift in an ocean of heresy. In the late medieval and early Renaissance period several were prosecuted for the direction of their researches. Eckhart was forced to recant on a series of beliefs central to his apophatic theology which drew heavily upon Plotinus and the pseudo-Dionysus. It seemed to the orthodox that too close an acquaintance with the mythical thinking of the ancients led to errors concerning the nature of the godhead and the plan of salvation. Eckhart was accused of denying the transcendence of God and the depravity of the human condition; he was accused of substituting knowledge for faith as the means to salvation. All of these were suspiciously gnostic doctrines, and, although he was finally acquitted, Eckhart's fate suggested to many in authority that the learning of the ancients trod a perilously unorthodox path.

There can be no doubt that there were several important groups of thinkers allied to the Neoplatonic schools for whom the allegoresis

of myth in order to disclose its religious teaching became a kind of mythopoesis. The development of the 'mystic way', the left-hand path through Neoplatonism and orthodox Christian theology brought into play among many of these speculations a free flow of mythic images the release of which was, according to the Church, dangerously destabilising.

Pictorial representations, such as Gafurius' celebrated "The Music of the Spheres" from his overtly Neoplatonic Practica Musice of 1496 were amenable to orthodox interpretation, which was how their authors defended them. But the dynamic mythic imagery of such works suggested that there were latent, deeply heterodox accounts to be given of them, misreadings which straightaway reconnected them with the vibrant stream of Pythagorean mythopoesis from which they were derived. Nicholas Cusanus had courted the same dialogic openness in his book De Doctor ignorantia wherein all knowledge is regarded as conjecture based on mythic vehicles. This led Cusanus to the dangerous belief that, since myths sprang from the human mind, then mind must be composed of a transcendent essence at one with divinity. Doctrines like these fractured the apparent medieval synthesis of faith and learning. As the Condemnations of 1277 show, decretals intended to outlaw this kind of marginally orthodox thought served only to highlight its intellectual significance, and did nothing to prevent its growth. Faith and learning eyed each other suspiciously.

But none of this was tantamount to heresy. Nor was it even the dominant form of literary humanism in the medieval and Renaissance periods. We can abandon the search made by an earlier generation of scholars to uncover some magical tradition of secret knowledge passed covertly down the ages. Allegoresis remained predominantly moral and orthodox in its interpretations, and the followers of the mystic way, though persecuted when necessary, regarded as a fringe activity irrelevant

to the main business of repossessing the mythologies of the ancients. The situation has been summarised effectively by Professor Wind:

...if the nature of the pagan gods were understood in the mystical sense of the Orphic Platonists and if the nature of Christian Grace were unfolded in the fullness of the secrets which St Paul had revealed to Dionysius the Areopagite, it would be found that these theologies differed not at all in substance but only in name. A philosophy of tolerance was accordingly worked out in the form of a hidden concordance which seemed to confirm the statement of St Augustine: "The thing itself, which is now called the Christian religion, was with the ancients, and it was with the human race from its beginnings to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh: from then on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian."⁶⁷

The father of Renaissance speculative mythology, as Seznec's work makes clear,⁶⁸ was Boccaccio, because his Genealogy of the Gods took the best of the medieval allegorizations and combined it with an encyclopedic love of detail which recovered (and sometimes invented) material that had eluded the medieval interpreters. Boccaccio's purposes are conventional: literal retelling as an account of an actual happening, moral edification, and Christian allegorizing. Hence the fable of Perseus slaying the Gorgon he sees as a true story of the destruction of a sea-monster, as a symbol of the wise man's conquest of sin, and as an allegory of Christ's defeat of the devil. Boccaccio's incomplete understanding of his sources led him to make many mistakes, including the infamous invention of Demogorgon, a figure nowhere found in the classical authors, as the progenitor of the gods. In addition, although Boccaccio's aim was to document the tales of the Olympian pantheon, his encyclopedic sweep drew in Oriental, and even Teutonic, deities, including many of the barbarous names associated with the mysteries. However, these errors did not deflect Boccaccio from his central aim to show that "pagan poets

had an imperfect sense of the true god."⁶⁹

Theoretical justification for allegoresis assumed that beneath the verbal covering of every myth, known as the integumentum, there lay a core of true meaning. As Renaissance speculative mythology developed from Boccaccio, the fictive nature of the integument began to be acknowledged. The various manuals for artists published in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries recognized that the element of the fabulous in most mythic narratives did not have to be accepted literally because this did not impair the texts' susceptibility to allegory. William Webbe made the same admission in his advice to poets in 1586, commenting upon the strictly incredible aspects of the Metamorphoses which "yet being moralized according to his meaning, and the truth of every tale being discovered, it is a work of exceeding wisdom and sound judgement."⁷⁰ The endurance of moral allegory as a reading strategy was further enhanced by its tolerance of interpretations which were the reverse of one another. Leander's swim across the Hellespont to join Hero could be seen in bono or in malo; in bono it signified the Christian soul struggling to reach God, in malo it depicted the fate of those immersed in erotic love.

However, in retrospect it is fair to conclude that the growing scepticism evinced towards its more fabulous aspects signalled the beginning of a decline in the standing in which myth was held by Renaissance humanism. Critics of allegoresis had always been in evidence. Aquinas had doubted the integrity of those who moralized the myths, and feared that it might do nothing more than increase respect for pagan beliefs. The English translator John Walton followed Boethius in his view that "It should not be a Christian man's work/The false gods' names to renew,"⁷¹ holding that pagan ideas were basically hostile to the Gospel. Rabelais scoffed at the tendency to moralize Homer and Ovid. In his Enchiridion Militis Christiani, Erasmus noted with typical

wryness that it was possible, if one tried, to find more sanctity in the myths than in the Bible. The level of suspicion increased markedly with the Protestant Reformation. Luther himself found moralized mythology worthless and decadent, and spurned it in his own commentaries.

Several bold attempts were made, as the Renaissance progressed, to purge moral allegory of mythological reference by replacing it with Biblical narrative. Abraham Cowley prefaced his Davideis (1668) with a prayer to God "T'unbind the charms that in slight fables lie,/And teach that Truth is truest poesy."⁷² Even Milton, whose respect for the classics was profound, could claim that Biblical subject-matter was "not less but more heroic" than myth.⁷³ In Joseph Beaumont's Psyche (1648) it is argued that divine themes require the ornament of "no pagan or human device whatsoever,"⁷⁴ a point taken still further by Edward Benlowe's Theophila which stated clearly its writer's intention to be rid of the classical apparatus: "A hallowed poet's Muse is th' Holy Dove./Parnassus th'empyrean height above."⁷⁵ Surveying this change in the seventeenth-century background, Seznec saw myth being reduced by official culture to mere artifice: "Increasingly erudite and diminishingly alive, less and less felt but more and more intellectualised - such, from now on, it seems, is to be the inescapable evolution of mythology."⁷⁶

Certain elements of mythopoeic thought survived, as we shall see, in various obscure undercurrents of European thought, driven underground by the changing intellectual climate. But the rise of the scientific worldview, paradoxically reinforced by a hardening of Christian attitudes, effectively ended the creative outburst of speculative mythology which had exercised the minds of European humanists for centuries. Reformation theologians disparaged the worldliness and frivolity of pagan myth. Counter-Reformation inquisitors indexed many of the

classical sources because of their proximity to demonic practices. The extent to which classical mythology was degraded by the increasing prestige accorded the natural sciences is reflected accurately in a comment from Thomas Sprat's History of the Royal Society (1667) which might well serve as an epitaph for the endeavours of speculative mythology: "The wit of the fables and religions of the ancient world is well nigh consumed. They have already served the poets long enough, and it is high time to dismiss them."⁷⁷

Mythological Syncretism

Sprat's animadversions signal the end of one particular phase of the response to mythology, at least as far as that response was borne in the minds of serious thinkers active in the upper strata of European intellectual life. However, modern appreciation of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution has broken down the artificial dichotomy that was once thought to exist between, on the one hand, rational investigation and the experimental method, and, on the other, irrational and symbolic habits of mind. The perspective of a previous generation of scholars on this crucial period has yielded, under the influence of Kuhn and Feyerabend,⁷⁸ to the argument that behind the objectivist claims of science there lie profound assumptions - paradigms - which determine how investigation is conducted. Scientific-revolutions involve paradigm-shifts which alter the network of assumptions, many of them frequently irrational, underpinning the investigator's world-view. Recent work on Newton, for example, has shown that behind the Principia lies a deeply irrational quasi-religious impulse.⁷⁹ Newton's overall project as a thinker was unambiguously hermetic, his grand design to produce a synthesis of experimental science and theosophical reflection. Similar paradigms underlie the work of many thinkers artificially

allied to a tradition of objective thought: Kepler, Copernicus, Brahe, Galileo. Much deeper sets of ideas and beliefs must be grasped before their contributions to knowledge can be fully comprehended. It is clear that running in parallel with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth-century there existed a potent tradition of theosophical speculation with its roots in the mythopoeic symbolism of antiquity and the middle ages.

This tradition has been unduly neglected in the study of post-Renaissance European letters. Drawing upon alchemy, Pythagorean numerology, the Cabala, apophatic theology, astrology and Neoplatonism, it issued in such diverse phenomena as musical philosophy and the heretical message of the inner light sects of the English Revolution. It represents the first, if the lesser, form of mythological syncretism to emerge after science had turned its cold gaze upon the fables of the ancients.

Ficino claimed in his translation of the Corpus Hermeticum (1494) to have brought together the wisdom of Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus - characters whom he and his contemporaries regarded as historical figures. These pseudonymous teachers, the argument ran, had passed on their wisdom to Pythagoras and from there it had been absorbed into the mainstream of classical philosophy where, unfortunately, it had become obscured by more rational approaches to learning. The outline of this thesis should be plain to us by now. The idea of a falling-away from primordial truth seems to be a recurring feature of the mythopoeic stance. Something like it must have inspired Plotinus to rewrite the philosophy of his master, Plato; it must have motivated Proclus to recover the lost truth of Plotinus...and so on. Misreading and re-reading take their place as the main strategies of this particular brand of syncretism.

Theosophical symbolism flows like an underground stream through the

Renaissance. From Ficino the message next emerged most militantly in the work of Cornelius Agrippa, a peculiar mixture of mage, alchemist and humanist. His De Occulta Philosophia of 1531 provoked sensation by its defence of high magic, which the author conceived as the ancient wisdom of the Orient rather than the practice of sorcery. The book ran to dozens of editions. Its three sections deal with elemental magic, the pursuit of intellectual truth, and the study of the celestial forces which govern the universe. It is in the last of these that Agrippa's handling of mythopoesis comes into its own. With precedent from many of the authorities that we have touched upon, Agrippa interprets the mythology of the ancients as a vast theosophical allegory depicting the flux and reflux of the cosmic influences whose movements unify and animate the world. Most notably, his approach rehabilitates the archaic concept of the Primal Man, attempting to prove that the symbolism of traditional mythology expounds the doctrine of Man's essential glory, his centrality in the created order. Though set out esoterically, this line of thought has a distinctly Renaissance complexion:

Seeing man is the most beautiful and perfectest work of God, and his Image, and also the lesser world; therefore he by a more perfect composition, and sweet Harmony, and more sublime dignity doth contain and maintain in himself all numbers, measures, weights, motions, Elements, and all other things which are of his composition...(God) made the whole fabrick of the world proportionable to man's body; from hence it is called the great world, mans body the less...80

Despite the magical apparatus, Agrippa's account of the mysteries and myths of the ancients is decidedly anthropocentric: man is the measure of all things.

The secret learning of De Occulta Philosophia passes down as a store of syncretistic occultism through Paracelsus and the Florentine aca-

demicians to Boehme. From there it moves to the Philadelphians, Henry More and the Cambridge Platonists, to William Law, Swedenborg and the later eighteenth-century 'enthusiasts', where it is absorbed by Blake, who purges it of the vulgarities it has picked up along the way, and revamps its mythological symbolism in new and fantastic forms. This is a path we need not go down. Its most able guide to date, Desirée Hirst, has revealed a process of increased interiorisation, whereby the secret learning progressively sheds the mythology until it has become, in many places, a site of barren meditation built upon occult mumbo-jumbo.⁸¹

A more fruitful and scholarly form of syncretism, aspiring within its own limitations to be objective, is to be found in the orthodox researches of those men who feared, with justification, that the scientific method would empty the world of all spiritual truths, including those of Christianity. This strain of 'higher syncretism' is poorly understood at present, though some efforts have been made recently to remedy this. Documentation of the tendency within seventeenth-and eighteenth-century thought is long overdue, because the matter that is available shows conclusively that it made a vital contribution to both Romanticism and the rise of the science of mythology.⁸²

As early as Patrizi's Neoplatonic compendium Magia Philosophica⁸³ of 1593 there is evident a propensity for cataloguing the myths of different sources according to various types, affinities and themes. This approach is developed in the work of the humanist Comes. His Mythologie⁸⁴ of 1627 is based upon the customary allegorising technique of the high Renaissance. But the breadth of his research is truly encyclopedic, classifying thousands of myths according to their types and the allegorical ends to which they might be put.

A slight but significant modification to the allegorical approach

produced a new and fertile understanding of mythology around the middle of the seventeenth century. Athanasius Kircher's great storehouse of mythological arcana, Oedipus Aegypticus⁸⁵ (1652-54) was founded upon the theory that all mythologies derived from the Patriarchs, a logical enough conclusion given the priority of Scripture. Kircher attempted to draw a phylogeny of myth which traced the classical narratives back to intermediary Egyptian myths, and thence to their prototypes in the Bible. A Scots follower of Kircher, Alexander Ross, in his A View of all Religions in the World⁸⁶ (3rd edition, revised, 1658) took this a stage further when he tried to demonstrate that all subsequent mythologies were based upon corrupt versions of Genesis stories, only half-remembered by the races who had peopled the world after the flood.

Between them, and quite unknowingly, Kircher and Ross had been conducting a rudimentary form of comparative mythology - founded upon Christian fundamentalism it is true, but nevertheless providing subsequent researchers with a radically new paradigm for studying the religion of the ancients.

Among the first to take up the new approach with enthusiasm was the Englishman John Turner. But Turner was a classicist deeply respectful towards the imaginative literature of the Greeks. Reading an earlier work of Ross, Mystagogus Poeticus⁸⁷ (1653) which had tried to look charitably upon Greek efforts to comprehend the One True God, Turner composed An Attempt Towards an Explanation of the Theology and Mythology of the Antient Pagans⁸⁸ (1687). In this work, Turner made bold steps to convince his readers that the mythology of the Greeks held in fragmented form recollections of the revelation accorded to Abraham and Moses. He saw Prometheus as a sun-god representing the highest pagan conception of what he termed in his tortuous philosophical prose the "Supreme Numen": "the same things are attributed to him,

which are accorded to God in Scripture."⁸⁹ At almost the same time, in France, the Abbe Paul Ives Pezron published his The Antiquities of Nations; more particularly of the Celtae or Gauls, Taken to be Originally the Same People as our Ancient Britons.⁹⁰

Although Pezron did not know of Turner's efforts, his work took a similar direction when he tried to show that the lineage of Gomer, Japhet's eldest son became the Sacae who migrated from the Indian Caucasus to become the Titans of Greece and thus the progenitors of all the European races.

The syncretism applied by these men to the study of mythology was motivated by serious Christian principles. The extent and composition of their readership is barely known. It is fair to say that they lauded the rational, indeed scientific, spirit of enquiry at large in their age and wanted to show that it could be used as a means of analysing seemingly superstitious material in order to advance the historical standing of the Christian religion. We see in their work the older, allegorical technique giving way to a new type of mythological syncretism. This is directed not towards magical or hermetic ends but to a rationalisation and codification of the inherited religious experience of mankind, governed by fidelity to the literal truth of Scripture and a commitment to the principles of inductive reasoning. It is thus an essentially Enlightenment project, which goes about rescuing mythology from the clutches of the mystagogues without surrendering it to the dismissive scepticism of the scientists.

Throughout the eighteenth-century this method gains ground, frequently generating new and eccentric forms of interpretation which, by their very extravagance, often afford fresh and genuinely useful insights into the nature of mythology. Part of the impetus behind this lay in the Enlightenment's enthusiasm for antiquarianism, which sought to classify the knowledge of the past and connect it up to make a systematic body of learning, another drive in which historical

studies imitated empirical science. Another important catalyst was the growth of Deism, or natural religion, which used the findings of science to conclude that the imprint of a creative intelligence was in evidence everywhere in the universe, pointing unmistakably towards God's existence and obviating the need for revealed religion.

Deism had two important consequences for students of mythology. Its insistence that evidence of God's handiwork was everywhere encouraged some scholars to see in ancient religions a deist tendency, believed to be rooted in the primitive mind's direct apprehension of God's presence in the natural world. For others, Deism confirmed the view that ancient mythologies were barbarous, irrational accretions to the primitive sense of the divine, a falling-away from truth initiated by priests and despots. Something of this thinking found its way into Thomas Burnet's The Sacred Theory of the Earth⁹¹ (1684), in which the author argued that the primitive mind automatically spiritualised those forces in the natural world beyond rational control. Ambitiously for his time, Burnet went on to suggest that Greek mythology was a narrative gloss over an earlier belief in the interactions of male and female sexual forces which primitive man had regarded as the governing principles of the universe. This had antedated even montheism.

Burnet's was a lone, rather eccentric voice, though his ideas were to prove influential among a later generation of exponents. Broad, sweeping theories about the origin of paganism tended, on the whole, to reinforce the Christian version of world history. Samuel Shuckford's were the most conservative. His Sacred and Profane History Connected (1731-40)⁹² pursued a cold-blooded literalist interpretation, coopting history to revelation using the chronologies established by Scaliger, Marsham and Ussher. He surveyed the pagan cosmogonies with a critical eye from the premise that conflict with Scripture indicated error.

Pagan theologies, he declared, were self-contradictory and only the Biblical one accorded with the historical record. The Abbé Noel Antoine Pluche argued a similar reductionism in his interpretation of mythology. In The History of the Heavens⁹³ (1739) he disparaged myth in tones similar to Shuckford. But he accounted for the rise of pagan belief systems by an ingenious logic. Pluche put forward the view that myths arose naturalistically. The zodiac, for example, would have originally been a simple calendar of important events in the agricultural year, probably devised by Noah. As they lost touch with their original context, the signs came to be revered for their own sake, and a cunning priesthood would have composed stories to explain their significance. Embedded in Pluche's prejudices is an intuitive recognition that myths are signs, "hieroglyphic figures" he calls them, which have become detached from a primary meaning and a base in real human actions. Myths are thus secondary, derived. Had he been able to separate this insight from his Biblical framework, Pluche could have developed a valuable new understanding of myth.

The faint beginnings of a move to de-emphasise the priority of the Bible in discussions of myth appear in Thomas Blackwell's Letters Concerning Mythology⁹⁴ (1748). Blackwell, a follower of Burnet, intended to show "...That the early Fables were framed to convey a Doctrine which is not a mere Conjecture of the Moderns."⁹⁵ That doctrine, according to Blackwell, was not Deism, but a much more subtle understanding of man's relation to the divine, sharing the same basic yearning as the Jews to know and understand their purpose in the world. Far from being barbarous or derivative, Blackwell argued, pagan myths enshrined intuitions of man's spiritual nature second only in wisdom and holiness to those of Scripture. Blackwell's approach was anti-rationalist in so far as he believed that the study of mythology carried us back to a unitary pagan wisdom, "the primitive

Philosophy, upon which the several Religions of the Ancients were originally grafted."⁹⁶ Although he also admitted, in common with many of his colleagues, that the myths had been subsequently corrupted by priestcraft, Blackwell believed that their primal insights into the divine could still be recovered.

The figure in whom the eighteenth-century's revaluation of myth reached its apogee unfortunately made little impact upon his contemporaries, his influence delayed until well into the next century. This was Giambattista Vico, a philosopher whose genius would require full-length study to do justice to it. Blackwell and Vico knew nothing of each other's work, but the Englishman would have seen in Vico's The New Science⁹⁷ (1744) his own views enlarged to embrace a complete reassessment of the contribution of myth to civilization. For Vico, myth is itself a form of knowledge, a primal understanding through which man overcomes his animal nature and discovers the transcendent. Without benefit of God's self-disclosure, primitive gentile man employed mythic thought to realise his proximity to the divine: "...mythos came to be defined for us as vera narratio or true speech."⁹⁸ Idolatry is thus really the "true falsehood", the "credible impossibility"⁹⁹ out of which early man discovered the operations of the cosmos.

Vico's work looks backward to an earlier style of rationalism in reserving its highest praise for the emergence of civic religion. But it also looks forward to the Romantic view of myth as the vehicle of wisdom, and a key to liberating imagination from the mundane. It was idiosyncratic enough to have little impact upon the central movement of mythological syncretism at work in the Enlightenment, but it anticipated something of the revolution that would appear in the attitude of creative artists to myth over the succeeding century and a half.

Robert Ackerman is correct to point out that "from the Enlightenment

down to the mid nineteenth century myth was thought of by many not only as a subject but in some sense the subject.¹⁰⁰ But his observations give insufficient weight to the scholarly, as opposed to the artistic, brands of syncretism which did so much to fashion the modern response to myth. Orthodox syncretism continued to study myth through a Christian or Deistic lens, the achievements of Vico notwithstanding. Andrew Ramsay restated the familiar Christian position in Discourse upon the Theology and Mythology of the Pagans (1752) with the by then standard concessions to the integrity of pagan efforts to make sense of the divine. Ramsay tried to show that all the peoples of the ancient world exhibited some sort of belief in a single, all-powerful deity. A new departure in his work was the inclusion of Persian, Indian and Chinese material in order to establish his categories of mythology, theology and fable, and to confirm his hypothesis that the same basic structure was discernible in all pagan beliefs. Myth he esteemed as a sincere attempt by those excluded from revealed religion to express their incomplete awareness of the sacred. Hence Ramsay searched for similar patterns in apparently dissimilar bodies of myth, relating principally to the themes of Fall and Redemption. This was the higher syncretism at its best, uncovering deep structures and outlining archetypes, even if its conclusions were sometimes awry:

It looks as if the Source of all the Allegories was only an Antient Tradition common to all Nations, that the Middle God, to whom they all give the Name of Sotor or Saviour, was to put an end to Crimes by his great sufferings. But I do not lay a Stress upon this Notion, my Design being only to speak of the Traces that appear in all Religions of a Nature exalted, fallen and to be repaired again by a Divine Hero.¹⁰¹

The greatest Christian syncretist of the late eighteenth century was the renowned Jacob Byrant. Byrant, who lived to be eighty-nine,

attempted in his chief work, A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology¹⁰² (1774), to gather together the best of the English speculations and essay a complete history of man's religious experience in the first ages of the world. He followed the more conservative of his predecessors in regarding pagan myth as a degraded remnant of the true Mosaic account of things. But the pedagogic streak in Byrant's approach, which harked back to the encyclopedists of the seventeenth-century, drove him to conjecture on a possible genealogy of myth that would account for the breakdown of the monotheism of the Jews into the polytheism of the pagans. Once again, the motive of the syncretism at work here was dogmatic and unhistorical, but it led Bryant into fruitful reflections. What was 'new' about his system was its emphasis on analysis - textual analysis - which functioned to reconstruct lost movements in history, language and ideas.

Concentrating on the post-deluge chapters of Genesis, Bryant determined that the descendents of Ham, the Cuthites or Amonians, were the first pagans, their veneration of their ancestor Ham degenerating, first, into sun-worship and then polytheism. Working in reverse, Bryant believed he could show that most myths might be reduced to corruptions of beliefs about the sun in its diurnal and annual cycles, which were, in turn, only degenerate forms of the worship of the God of Israel.

Establishing sun-worship as a unifying principle enabled Byrant to present ancient mythologies as a coherent whole, thereby devising the most efficient system of syncretism which orthodox scholarship had yet produced:

The Deity, which they originally worshipped, was the Sun. But they soon conferred his titles upon some of their ancestors: whence arose a mixed worship...In respect then to the names, which this people, in process of time, conferred

either upon Deities they worshiped...we shall
find them to be generally made up of some original
terms for a basis, such as Ham, Cham, and Chus...103

As we can see, one of the principle techniques Bryant applied to his textual criticism was etymology. In doing this, Bryant advanced the methods of his predecessors, undertaking a rudimentary 'comparative' mythology. He sets down the 'radicals' or fundamental units of the hypothetical Amonian tongue from which all the sacred pagan languages have been constructed in accord with his basic premise that all such languages deal with the worship of the sun:

Of these terms shall I first treat; which I look
upon as so many elements, whence most names in
ancient mythology have been compounded; and into
which they may be easily resolved; and the history,
with which they are attended, will, at all times,
plainly point out, and warrant the etymology.104

Bryant's etymologies were wayward, and his pietistic attitude to pagan idolatry a throwback to earlier kinds of syncretism. But his convergent linguistic and comparativist approaches, pointing back towards a unified system of pagan beliefs only one step removed from the truth, appealed to many, and lent authority to textual criticism as a means of analysing myth.

The defence of Christian supremacy in the study of primitive religious belief took on added urgency in the later eighteenth century as the attacks of Deists and Enlightenment sceptics on revealed religion intensified. Bryant, for one, was aware that if syncretism did not always hold before it the truth of the Christian faith, it could become a dangerous instrument in the hands of atheists and sceptics, used to show that Christianity was just another superstitious creed basically equivalent to paganism. The popularity of Bishop William Warburton's The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated reflected, in part, a reaction to this danger. Originally published in 1737-

41, it was not until its third 1788 edition that it really made an impact, perhaps because of the success of Bryant.¹⁰⁵

Warburton returned to older habits of thought in re-examining the allegorical possibilities of myth. But he saw allegory less in moral than in epistemological terms. Stressing the socially useful aspect of religion in binding communities together, Warburton went on to suggest that myths were pragmatic devices for teaching one thing to the public and another to those wise enough to delve deeper into the narratives. There was an echo of Blackwell's esteem for the 'pagan philosophy' in all this. Warburton claimed that, while the multitude were polytheistic, the elite read the myths as allegories of a complex monotheism. This was reinforced by a division in praxis between esoteric and exoteric elements. The Mysteries initiated the elite into a monotheism with a pedigree stretching back to the Egyptians, and beyond, to the primal belief of Moses and the Patriarchs. Warburton makes myth allegorical on its higher levels, and literal on its lower, and accounts for the victory of the literalising tendency by explaining that ignorant priestcraft would have dissociated the fables from their spiritual context and set them up as true stories in the minds of the masses:

The symbol of each God was well known and familiar to his worshippers...so that the symbol presenting the idea of the God, and that idea exciting elements of religion, it was natural for them in their addresses to any particular deity to turn towards his representative mark of symbol...This would, of course, bring on a relative devotion to these symbolic figures...¹⁰⁶

Once again, as with Pluche and Blackwell, a rupture in the process of signification is presumed to have occurred by which signs have become detached from their transcendent reference and assumed an independent, free-floating meaning. Mythological syncretism frequently dreams of an anterior unity itself mythological, imaginary,

followed by a disastrous dissociation of symbol and reference. The rhetorical procedures of syncretism are themselves attempts to recover, and, indeed to reproduce, that lost unity. The scholarship enacts in writing the reverse of what it believes to have occurred in history.

It is ironic, then, that the last great Enlightenment mythographer should be the most iconoclastic. Charles Dupuis, a child of the French Revolution, published his Origine de tous les cultes ou la Religion universelle¹⁰⁷ in 1794 with explicitly rationalist and deist intentions. He championed those very anti-Christian explanations which Bryant had feared would be the culmination of syncretism. He revived the strong anti-mythological arguments, dismissing the fables as superstitious nonsense used to gull the illiterate and maintain the suzerainty of their priest-kings. Christianity itself, he claimed, was reducible to a solar mythology. In order to defend his thesis, Dupuis gathered together a vast corpus of mythic detail which, paradoxically, later writers were to mine in the name of causes very different from his own. His ideas, on the other hand, had a shortlived appeal, confined to a small spectrum of anti-religious radicals who believed they might be used as weapons against the Church.

One of the first English thinkers to turn to Dupuis' encyclopedic reservoir of world mythology in order to build new sets of theories was George Stanley Faber. Faber's work occupies a transitional phase in mythography because by 1816 a flood of new information about primitive religions was reaching the learned societies as a by-product of imperial expansion. The process by which Western understanding of exotic and primitive societies was shaped is rendered in fascinating detail by Edward Said.¹⁰⁸ As far as the development of comparative mythology is concerned, the growth of empire brought Western travellers into first-hand contact with the religions of the Orient and the Americas, made closer inspection of ancient and exotic languages

possible, and seriously strained the syncretistic powers of orthodox Christian mythologers.

Faber rose to this challenge in his book The Origin of Pagan Idolatry,¹⁰⁹ and by 'pagan' he referred to living societies as well as dead ones. A Christian and a rationalist, Faber built his work on Bryant and Warburton with material plundered from Dupuis. Instead of focusing all mythology on sun-worship, Faber argued that all pagan divinities were originally deified men, and that the men so deified were those from either the first age of Adam and his sons, or the second age of Noah and his sons. Hence a prominent feature of all religions is the worship of an Allfather, often, though not exclusively, seen as the sun. The prototype of this Allfather cannot be, as Bryant thought, God himself, because the pagans had lost all knowledge of God, as the Bible makes clear, but rather Noah who is, of course, equated with Adam. Noah and/or Adam constitute the race memory of a Great Father from whom all minor deities stem.

Curiously, Faber has no explanation to account for the fate of Eve, or the other women in Genesis, in the race memory. However, in his analysis of female pagan deities he invokes a similar syncretistic procedure, except that the goddesses of antiquity and of primitive communities worldwide are traced back to a race memory of the Ark from which new life teemed after the Flood. As the source of life, the Ark came to be identified with the Earth, which, as the ages passed, began to be venerated as the Great Mother. The spread of the human race carried this archetype far and wide until it fragmented into the cults of the various goddesses of the ancient world.

The bizarre machinery of Faber's syncretism is not particularly important, and it was scoffed at by his opponents. What is significant is that Faber tried to build a single coherent system from a vast storehouse of myth. In a sense the Biblical framework is almost

incidental. The real breakthrough in Faber's work is his discernment of a series of themes or archetypes common to all the mythologies he surveyed. Abolish the Biblical framework and these archetypes remain, begging to be explained: "I have made no distinction between the mythologies of different nations, but have considered them all together as jointly forming a single well-compacted system."¹¹⁰ The idea that the mythologies of the world exhibit repeating patterns of narrative, incident and character, suggesting a common point of origin outside themselves, was to be the dominant view of anthropology until well into the twentieth century. Faber was the first to push the logic of syncretism as far as the discernment of a monomyth within which all myths could be subsumed.

As we noted above, events beyond the realm of mere scholarship were conspiring to threaten the best efforts of the enquirers into religion and myth as the new century dawned. A clearer understanding of exotic living religions, such as Hinduism, was forming in the wake of the penetration of the Orient by a new generation of explorers and empire-builders. Books like Henry Pottinger's Travels in Beloochistan and Sinde (1816)¹¹¹ and Mountstuart Elphinstone's Account of the Kingdom of Caubul (1817)¹¹² were not only extremely popular, they also furnished investigators with sizeable quantities of new material from religions which had hitherto not touched the literary culture of Western Europe. Increasingly, younger enthusiasts for myth disparaged the Eurocentrism of Bryant and Warburton and turned their attention to the newly-discovered wonders of the East. Of course, a major obstacle to better understanding of faiths like Hinduism was the language barrier. So societies were formed with the specific intention of furthering studies in Sanskrit and Indian mythology.

The new century saw a steady but momentous shift in the scholarly attitude to myth. It was not simply that the focus had moved from

the classical civilizations to the Orient; nor was it the displacement of Christian apologetics from the main concerns of the investigators. This had certainly occurred to a certain extent, but Scripture continued to be the light by which other religions were read. So foreign were the traditions of the Orient, that serious scholarship was compelled to begin with language, and that single fact altered the face of mythological analysis and ended the influence of syncretism as a school of thought very swiftly.

When Thomas Maurice set as the goal of his Indian Antiquities of 1800¹¹³ "the derivation of all languages from one primaeval tongue, as well as of all nations from one great family"¹¹⁴ he in part restated one of the main aims of his predecessors. But in his concentration on language he was working within the slowly developing understanding of what future generations would know as the Indo-European language group. The conceptual foundations of a linguistic approach to myth were being laid by thinkers such as Sir William Jones who exploded the false etymologies of Bryant and fostered the study of Sanskrit, and Sylvestre de Sacy who extended the study of comparative languages. The ground-breaking psychology of symbolism begun by Faber found its textual counterpart in the new seriousness with which the linguistics of myth was being approached. On this foundation, a science of mythology could now be built.

The Science of Mythology

The paucity of materials concerning the obscure history of syncretism in the eighteenth century is matched by an abundance of sources from which to build up an account of the nineteenth century's fascination with myth. However, the rise of anthropology concerns us less than do the values and definitions that came to be attached to the idea of myth by the culture in which this recognition of its

centrality was growing. I have tried to show throughout this chapter that the response to myth has never been disinterested, never truly scientific. Rather, myth has been seen to lie at the centre of a conflict of discursive practices waged, sometimes unwittingly, between a variety of cultural forces anxious to appropriate the singularly unstable concept of myth for their own purposes. How this continuing tension manifested itself in the early years of the discipline we now know as anthropology has been ably demonstrated by several authorities.¹¹⁵ We need not restate it except insofar as the salient features of the argument touch upon the subject of the closing stages of this chapter: the privileging of myth as a means of making sense of human consciousness; or, to paraphrase Eliot, how myth came to be regarded as a way of making the modern world "possible for art."

An important shift of perspective began to occur as early as the work of the German idealist philosophers. The Enlightenment goal of studying human civilization as a totality facilitated the view, first promulgated by Herder, that mythic truth should be studied for its own sake, without reference to anything external to it. Both Goethe and Moritz used Herder as a way of reading their new discovery, Vico, and emerged from this interaction of texts with a revolutionary view which saw myth not as a lesser form of theology but as an expression of a primal bond between the energies of nature and the Volk. Celestial and chthonic divinities were not to be allegorized, but seen, rather, as manifestations of the life force striving towards organic fulfilment in its finest expression, Man. Myths were the language of this life-force, a symbolic language to be understood in hermeneutical, not analytical, terms.

The cult of the natural allied itself to the notion of myth as symbolic language in the work of Schlegel, who saw myth as an internally coherent system which "...plunges us into the universe...in a magic realm

of eternal metamorphoses, where nothing exists in isolation, but everything rises out of everything by a most marvellous creation.¹¹⁶"

The rhetoric of penetration is appropriate because, for Schlegel, myth carries us downwards to the realm of the irrational unconscious, of instinctual feeling and its bedrock in the folk imagination, then upwards again to the earth, and the soil, and the heights of creativity. Devotion to this metaphor allied Schlegel to the project of the Grimm brothers: the recovery of an autochthonous pan-Germanic mythology from the folklore of the peasantry.

In the writings of Schelling these ideas found their most rigorous philosophical expression. Schelling saw myth as the only vehicle for carrying man back to a unity with the Absolute because, unlike theology, it had shaken itself free from the shackles of abstraction. No belief-system could succeed in containing the symbolic power of myth, because it was constantly reproaching man and reaching out to its origin beyond the boundary of consciousness in the nature of God himself. Myth, in Schelling's philosophy, restores man to a unity of being with the cosmos because it is the record of the self-disclosure of the Absolute and its continuing evolution in the human psyche. The psychological effect of myth is to transform divided human awareness into a new and affirmative wholeness.

Schlegel and Schelling sought empirical support for their theories in the work then going on to confirm the existence of a primitive Aryan mother-tongue. Schlegel himself spoke of unearthing a "comparative grammar"¹¹⁷ beneath all human speech, and the quest to recreate the probable structure of this Ursprache proceeded apace in the work of thinkers of a more realist persuasion. Linguistic breakthroughs in the first decades of the nineteenth century verified the hypothesis, and the family tree of Indo-European languages began to emerge. Among the first to seize upon the new insights that Indo-Europeanism

afforded was the German scholar K.O. Müller. His Introduction to a Scientific System of Mythology (1825)¹¹⁸ proposed that the myths of the Indo-Europeans combined euhemeristic, aetiological and allegorical motifs arising primarily out of religious worship. The proposition that "the mythus relates an action...the symbol renders it visible to sense",¹¹⁹ provided a germ from which the later ritualist theory would emerge.

However, one unwelcome side-effect of the discovery of the mother-tongue was that for decades the study of myth became bogged down in a morass of futile linguistic argument. In a sense, confirming the existence of Indo-European seemed to validate the direction in which the research of the previous generation of syncretists had been moving: an Ur-language suggested an Ur-religion, akin to Blackwell's "pagan philosophy" or the sub-Biblical faiths contemplated by Warburton. However, Biblical prescriptivism no longer held sway. Few scholars believed in simple post-Deluge diffusionist models any longer.

Nevertheless, it is amazing how apparently 'scientific' breakthroughs can in fact be used to disinter and revive older, manifestly unscientific, perspectives. When the celebrated F.Max Müller took up comparative philology as a means of studying myth his conclusions led him to belief in an anterior solar mythology which repeated many of the discredited views of Bryant and Dupuis. He also echoed Bryant's enthusiasm for the play of etymologies in generating fable.

In Lectures on the Science of Language (1880),¹²⁰ Müller set forth his view that the Aryans had expressed their observation of nature anthropomorphically in metaphorical language. Müller accepted Schelling's contention that the symbolic language of myth was incapable of abstraction, though this was something Müller considered barbarous. Unable to conceive abstractions as simple as "it is night", the Aryans

were obliged to say something like "Selene kisses Endymion into sleep" in the mythic awareness that Selene referred to the moon and Endymion the sun. The dispersal of the tribes dispersed the metaphors as well, and when the original meanings were lost, new stories were invented to explain them. Mythology is therefore, in Müller's famous phrase, "a disease of language...Most of the heathen gods are nothing but poetical names which were gradually allowed to assume a divine personality never contemplated by their original inventors."¹²¹ The search for the primitive mythologems behind the metaphoric accretions led Muller to a familiar conclusion: that most myths derived from man's sense of wonder before the majesty of the sun. At the core of Western language, he argued, lay an array of Indo-European nouns and adjectives expressing the power of the sun in human affairs.

Many critics have seen in Müller's obsessions with language the beginnings of a truly structuralist approach to the study of myth.¹²² But the title of his major work should not delude us. As our profile of the syncretic tradition has shown, nothing of his methodology was especially original. Blackwell, Bryant and Dupuis had begun from similar premises, though without the benefit of Indo-European linguistics, and had arrived at similarly all-embracing hypotheses. Müller's work, in fact, in its urge to build a general theory of myth, was deeply anachronistic. Etymological explanations and solarism were long discredited theories unable to withstand the new evidence which ethnological research was bringing to bear on mythology.

It is small wonder, then, to note that, in his own time, Müller and his ideas met stiff resistance. The folklorist Andrew Lang opposed them bitterly in dozens of critical articles. The linguist R.F. Littledale questioned many of Müller's etymologies. But the voice raised in strongest protest was that of the ethnologist E.B.

Tylor. Tylor gained notoriety when, using Müller's techniques, he 'proved' "A Song of Sixpence" to be a solar myth. But his own field of research was to have decisive influence over the next theory to dominate the fledgling science of anthropology.¹²³

Out of Darwin's conception of biological evolution, Tylor felt that the hypothesis of the evolution of human thought logically followed. A uniform pattern of development was evident in the evolution of human societies, from savage to civilized, therefore it was reasonable to conclude that the worldview of savage peoples bore little resemblance to that of advanced societies. It was the duty of the ethnologist to reconstruct that worldview.

Tylor here connected his thought to a potent stream of Romantic ideas. The primitive, he argued, represented a distinct phase in the evolution of humanity, equipped with its own "mentality". In Primitive Culture (1871),¹²⁴ Tylor defined this mentality as "animistic": attributing spirit to inanimate objects; a proclivity which functioned as a rudimentary but logical theory of the world. Myth was the consequence of a failure to separate subjective and objective data of experience, and the resultant coalescence of language with reality. Primitive man expressed his wonder before the animated world in concrete images and incidents. The raw material of his imagery came, Tylor argued, from the rites he performed to propitiate and worship the spiritual force which animated everything around him.

There were traces in all this of Tylor's contact with biblical scholars like W. Robertson Smith, whose Old Testament researches had led him to conclude that sacrifice and ceremony had played a more prominent role in the worship of Yahweh than had hitherto been thought.¹²⁵ Tylor took up some of these ideas when he proposed that the narratives of mythology were based on rites: "a fiction devised to explain an old custom, of which the real meaning had been forgotten."¹²⁶

Tylor's approach represented a new departure in mythological research because of its elevation of the primitive, its avoidance of the general theory, and because of its insistence on actually studying the practices of primitive people as a basis for building hypotheses. Together with Lang, Tylor founded the Folklore Society in 1878, and primitive anthropology had been born.

Tylor's ideas exerted a tremendous influence over those scholars with a yearning to revive some new overarching explanation of myth which would shake off the dead hand of philology. The novel assumption that the door to all mythologies lay in the primitive mind, and that the key to this door might be the primitive's devotion to ritual, prompted J.G. Frazer to examine one particular ritual: "the remarkable rule which regulated the succession to the priesthood of Diana at Aricia."¹²⁷ After three decades of work and three editions, Frazer produced his definitive and monumental masterpiece The Golden Bough.¹²⁸

The achievement of The Golden Bough lies in the encyclopedic breadth of its materials. It is true to say that nothing like it in sheer scope had been attempted since the Renaissance. Frazer gathered together a plethora of mythical motifs and primitive folk customs assimilated to a theory of the development of human culture through three socio-economic (hunting, pastoral, agricultural) and psychological (magical, religious, and scientific) phases, from the remotest pre-history to modern times.

It is important to recognize that Frazer offered no all-embracing theory of mythology to cover every narrative. Aetiological explanation, euhemerist historiography, imitation of natural events, allegory and fetishism exist together in his findings. But he did assimilate these to a system, to what he regarded as the dominant fears and anxieties of the primitive mind. Fascinated in particular by the

recurrence throughout the world of sacrifice, to the accompaniment of myths of dying-and-rising gods, Frazer speculated that for primitive man the welfare of the tribe depended upon the performance of magical rites, and that, inevitably, in primitive societies the magician rose to a priestly or royal station. The tribe's existence is intimately bound up with the well-being of this priest-king, whose individual growth, health and decay express the seasonal cycle of nature and the birth, death and resurrection of the year-god who is incarnate in the succession of priest-kings. More especially, the sexual vigour of the king is organically related to the fertility of the land, and if it is in any way impaired then the land and the people will fail. Frazer held this to be the key to the mystery cults, the secret into which the neophytes were initiated - that the king and the land are one - and found the pattern repeated in hundreds of religions and esoteric practices. The story of the life, death and resurrection of the sacred king, he further argued, was dramatised by the primitive mind in a succession of rituals in which its key episodes were highlighted, and these rituals formed the basis of the mythic narratives developed to justify them.

Frazer's ideas appeared to find corroboration from the work of continental authors. Building upon the radical views of Durkheim, who proposed that religion existed simply to regulate and preserve the social order, Arnold Van Gennep turned his attention to primitive societies. In his Rites of Passage (1909),¹²⁹ he portrayed the individual as moving through a succession of life-stages from birth to death, the thresholds of which were marked by communal ceremonies designed to connect individual experience to the great rhythms of the universe. Myths existed to explain and reiterate the rites, marking out a three-fold pattern of separation, margin and attainment which formed the individual character in relation to the beliefs of his society.

Lucien Levy-Bruhl termed this the "participation mystique"¹³⁰ because he believed that it revealed the basis of primitive thought to lie entirely outwith Western civilized notions of individuality, category, identity and contradiction. Instead, for the primitive, empirical knowledge and magic interpenetrated one another, and myth reflected a Weltanschauung where all things could metamorphose into other things.

The group of disciples who gathered round Frazer and turned his ideas into a small industry came to be known as the Cambridge Ritualists. But it is interesting to note that, for all their emphasis upon the new discipline of anthropology, the original members of the school, Jane Harrison, F.M. Cornford, A.B. Cook and Gilbert Murray, were unreconstructed classicists. Later they were joined by S.H. Hooke (a Middle Eastern specialist) and Jessie Weston (a Celtologist), perhaps the single member of the group most responsible for the dissemination of Frazer's ideas, through her best-seller From Ritual to Romance (1920).¹³¹

It was in Jane Harrison's books, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (1911)¹³² and Themis (1912),¹³³ that the ritual view of myth found its most mature expression, in a form which made a huge impact upon English letters. Traditional Greek usage, Harrison argued, clearly reveals that myth is...

...the spoken correlative of the acted rite, the thing done; it is to legomenon as contrasted with or rather as related to dromenon...The myth is not at first aetioloical, it does not give a reason; it is representative, another form of utterance, of expression. When the emotion that started the ritual has died down and the ritual though hallowed by tradition seems unmeaning, a reason is sought in the myth and it is regarded as aetioloical.¹³⁴

This was a crucial distinction, because it reinvested the concept of myth with an autonomy it had not possessed for intellectuals since

the Renaissance. No longer was it necessary to rely upon the rhetoric of the German idealists when defending myth. Its importance as a structuring, ordering principle in humanity's transactions with the natural and supernatural realms was now guaranteed by its material base in the actions of primitive man. Working within this perspective, Cornford was able to propose that religion, law, philosophy and science all flowed from "mythical cosmogony" and primitive man's ritualized collective functions.¹³⁵

The further possibility emerged that myth was the direct product of the cultic life of a people, rendering intelligible a complex drama. A myth functions as an important disclosure of a total cultural reality which has its foundation in cultic action. As Harrison acknowledged, a myth may become separated from its ritual context, but it is never originally far removed from cult. Jessie Weston exploited this possibility for literary minds when she unravelled the themes of the task of the hero, the freeing of the waters, the sword dance, the medicine man, the fisher king, the waste land and the innocent fool. She contended that the Grail romances - and, by extension, all quest stories - were "the fragmentary record of the secret ritual of a Fertility Cult."¹³⁶ This immediately opened up the prospect to a generation of writers that imaginative literature might once again assume a spiritual role in modern culture, ministering to the psychic and communal needs of a damaged, deracinated world, repeating ancient patterns at work beneath the surface of modern life.

It is to Harrison and Weston, then, that the dissemination of the ritual theory of myth is to be attributed, as well as its transfer to the language of imaginative writing and literary criticism. Through them, the philosophy of The Golden Bough, Themis and From Ritual to Romance went on to become the literal text of some of the most important works of the modern era. In the next chapter I shall

begin by considering why this happened, with special reference to the developing mythopoeic thought of Robert Graves.

In a sense, the title of Jessie Weston's book, From Ritual to Romance, recapitulates the natural history of myth and the part it has played in European civilization from the earliest times to the modern era. In one of his most haunting insights, Vico stated that myth was constantly burdened by the sense of its own "lateness",¹³⁷ of being at one remove from the experience of wonder or enthrallment which it tried to incarnate, of being but a "trace" of an earlier plenitude. This insight goes straight to the heart of the problem of myth. Always and everywhere, whether it be among the shamans of the arctic tundra, or the groves of academe, myth has been regarded as the repository of a secret, a mystery. By some this mystery has been abominated as the seat of blasphemy or superstition; by others it has been hallowed as access to new and revelatory ways of seeing the world. But always, myth is invested with unique and special meaning. Self-consciously at the end of an epoch of speculation, yet convinced that his work lay on the threshold of some unparalleled understanding, Robert Graves renewed the struggle to use myth as an agent for healing the waste land of modernity.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. Initiatives by the Bollingen Foundation have produced such works as: Kathleen Raine, Blake and Tradition (London, 1969), and Raphael Patai, Myth and Modern Man (New Jersey, 1972). In recent years, the work of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mythographers has come in for fresh scrutiny, but this scholarship is still in its infancy. The Garland Series (London, 1976-80) presents a selection, albeit haphazard, of Renaissance and Enlightenment texts connected with myth and religion (see below). In 1981, Yale University Press announced a forthcoming series devoted to eighteenth-century texts which formed part of the intellectual background to Romanticism. So far nothing has been published. A pioneer work in this field is: Stuart Curran, Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision (San Marino, 1975). The impact of the seminal selection by Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860 (Bloomington, 1972), has yet to be felt in literary criticism. This is an anthology of extracts from dozens of writers who helped bring the concept of myth into mainstream cultural discourse. I have drawn heavily on the sources contained in this volume.

2. T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth", The Dial, November 1923, p. 67.

3. Roland Barthes, Mythologies (London, 1972), p. 155.

4. See Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination (Paris, 1984). On the question of 'intentionality' in imaginative literature, see Roger Scruton, "Public Text and Common Reader", in Laurence Lerner (ed), Reconstructing Literature (Oxford, 1983), p. 38. Scruton writes: "The existence of the distinction between what a speaker means, and what his sentence means, in no way shows that we cannot analyse the latter objectively. On the contrary, it suggests that we can and must. At the same time, we must beware of any view that sees reference to artistic creation, Kunstwollen, and the like, as irrelevant to public meaning. Although the meaning of a sentence is not given by the intention with which it is used, it would not have the meaning that it has were it not for its place in the expression of intention."

5. Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York, 1949), p. 202.

6. The White Goddess, subtitle.

7. This is the line taken by Daniel Hoffmann, Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves and Muir (New York, 1967), pp. 182-225.

8. I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism, 2nd ed. (London, 1926), p. 218.

9. F. Max Muller, Lectures on the Science of Language, 6th ed. (London, 1880), p. 12.

10. William Blake, Complete Writings (Oxford, 1972), p. 406.

11. Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology (London, 1926), p. 2.

12. Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology, 2nd ed. (London, 1976), p. 286.
13. Ibid p. 310. Campbell is here drawing upon the ground-breaking work of Abbe H. Breuil, Four Hundred Centuries of Cave Art (Montignac, no date), pp. 90ff.
14. Campbell, op. cit. p. 313.
15. Carleton S. Coon, The Origin of Races (New York, 1966), pp. 34-35.
16. Mircea Eliade, From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions (London, 1967), pp. 16, 18.
17. Joseph Campbell, The Way of the Animal Powers: Historical Atlas of World Mythology Volume I (London, 1984), p. 9. The classic account of shamanism is, of course, Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (London, 1951).
18. Adolf Jensen, Das religiöse Weltbild einer frühen Kultur (Stuttgart, 1949), pp. 34-38.
19. Campbell, Primitive Mythology, p. 464.
20. Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in human culture (London, 1949).
21. John A. Wilson, "Egypt", in Henri Frankfort, Mrs H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson and Thorkild Jacobsen, Before Philosophy: the intellectual adventure of ancient man (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 72.
22. S.H. Hooke, Middle Eastern Mythology (London, 1963), p. 12
23. Thorkild Jacobsen, "Mesopotamia", Before Philosophy, pp. 139-40.
24. Henri Frankfort, "Myth and Reality", Before Philosophy, pp. 19, 237.
25. Ibid pp. 252-53.
26. Ibid p. 251.
27. Francis Cornford (ed), Cambridge Ancient History, IV, p. 532.
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32. Wilhelm Nestle, Vom Mythos zum Religion (Berlin, 1949), preface.
33. E.R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley, 1951).
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38. Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (Harmondsworth, 1986).
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42. cf. Pausanias (trans. Peter Levi), Guide to Greece (London 1971), Vol 1, pp. 114ff.
43. Fox, op. cit. pp. 260-61.
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cf. Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion (Boston, 1963); Benjamin Walker, Gnosticism: its History and Influence (Wellingborough, 1983); Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (London, 1980); Bentley Layton (ed), The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Volume One: The School of Valentinus (Leiden, 1980). Source material may be found in Werner Foerster (trans. R.McL. Wilson), Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts, 2vols (Oxford, 1974).
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47. Jonas, op. cit. p. 175.
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49. Jeffrey Burton Russell, Witchcraft in the Middle Ages (London, 1972), pp. 98-99.
50. Joel Fineman, "Gnosis and the Piety of Metaphor: The Gospel of Truth", in Layton, op. cit. p. 90. This marvellously erudite essay, which deals with matter at the forefront of post-structuralist theory, is the best study of the relationship between Gnosticism and literary theory to date.

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60. Margaret A. Murray, The Witch-Cult in Western Europe (Oxford, 1921); The God of the Witches (London, 1931). Graves was indebted to Murray's work: see below, pp.
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62. Theodora Buttner and Ernst Werner, Circumcellionen und Adamiten: Zwei Formen mittelarchen Haeresie (Berlin, 1959), p. 98. Quoted in Russell, op. cit. p.128, and presumably translated by him.
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77. Thomas Sprat, History of the Royal Society (London, 1667), p. 413.
78. See: Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (London, 1970); Paul Feyerabend, Against Method: outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge (London, 1975); Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method (Cambridge, 1981).
79. Revolutionary notions first suggested by Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy, or, The Hunting of the Greene Lyon (Cambridge, 1975). This is a rapidly-expanding field in the history of science, shattering many previously-held rationalist prejudices regarding the intellectual climate of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. It is now clear that hermetic philosophy and occultism played a much larger part in the scientific revolution than used to be believed. See also Thomas George Cowling, Isaac Newton and Astrology (Leeds, 1977).
80. Cornelius Agrippa, Three Books of Occult Philosophy (London, 1651), p. 263.
81. Desiree Hirst, Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism From The Renaissance To Blake (London, 1964). Hirst's study is now somewhat dated, but she confirms the view that an undercurrent of hermetic symbolism, largely ignored by orthodox scholarship, had a widespread influence upon eighteenth-century intellectuals, and, later, upon the Romantics.
82. As I noted earlier, this is an area which academic research has only begun to penetrate. The paucity of readily-available primary sources continues to hinder investigation. The following survey is the fruit of many hours labour among dusty tomes many of which cry out for reprinting in modern editions. My contention is that when eighteenth-century syncretism is properly understood we will have to re-chart the whole pedigree of Romantic thought. In his own confused, poorly-documented fashion, the critic Edward Hungerford understood this. See his Shores of Darkness (New York, 1941), pp. 62-91.
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Chapter 3: The Poet as Exile: Origins of the Single Poetic Theme

Myth, Psychology, Modernity

A distinguished critic of our time has tried to account for the persistence of mythopoesis in modern literature by recourse to a theory of modes which attempts to define the dominant literary mode of each particular historical epoch. According to Northrop Frye, a complete historical cycle may be traced, from fictions in which the hero's power of action is greater than ours, such as myth, romance and epic, through to those in which the hero's power is less than ours, such as irony, where "we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity..." The cycle of modern European literature has moved, Frye believes, from the myth and romance modes of the Renaissance to the ironic minimalism of Joyce, Kafka and Beckett. But the truly arresting feature of this point in the cycle is that, at its most minimal, the ironic mode again "moves steadily towards myth, and the dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it." The sequences of modes, Frye concludes, "evidently go round in a circle."¹

The re-emergence of myth as one of the prevailing modes of modernist writing was inextricably bound up with the rise of anthropology as a human science. No longer could myth be used simply as a source of imagery or symbolism. Each myth was freighted with an anthropological interpretation; each myth could be located within a meta-mythological structure, usually that of the Cambridge Ritualists, which not only explained its meaning, but also invested it with a significance directly relevant to the condition of modern man.

If the background to this new-found relevance of myth lay in models of the human collective derived from anthropology, it was decisively foregrounded upon another nascent science, in this case one which sought to construct a model of the individual pattern of meaning

and action: psychology. We have seen already how these two interests could converge in the work of a thinker such as W.H.R. Rivers, whose researches in ethnology were underpinned by a basically Freudian model of the psyche. The commerce between psychology and anthropology was, from the outset, mutually alimentary, the scientific study of the unconscious providing a new and enduring context for the spiritual influences whose immeasurable importance anthropology appeared to have revealed. From this conjunction, the equation was a simple one: the primitive came to be identified with the unconscious; the ontogeny of the individual's psychic life recapitulated the phylogeny of the tribe's or the race's triumph over the refractory forces of nature. Anthropology and psychology between them provided the key to unlocking man's dependence upon forces of which he was only dimly aware.

Commensurate with this convergence of interests was the psychological approach to myth which, once again, benefited creative artists by supplying them with a justification for dramatising the life of the mind according to the ancient narratives. The popularity of Otto Rank's The Myth of the Birth of the Hero (1909)² lay precisely in its application of the techniques of psychoanalysis to a large body of mythology in order to disclose a common pattern. According to Rank, the birth-trauma was the source of all neuroses, and myth was essentially a dream-narrative in which was expressed the longing to return to the intrauterine condition, envisaged as a prelapsarian paradise from which the hero was outcast, and the return to which was blocked by all manner of obstacles.

Rank, his compatriot Karl Abraham (who in the same year published his Dreams and Myths³), and even, to a lesser extent, Jane Harrison, looked to the Freud of The Interpretation of Dreams (1908) for the raw materials of this new synthesis of myth. Freud had noted that

"myths...are the distorted vestiges of the wish-phantasies of whole nations - the age-long dreams of young humanity."⁴ The language Freud used betrayed his dependence upon older, evolutionary notions of human thought. His belief in the development of human social organization from the primal horde led him to the view that myth was a repository of repressed impulses released through safe and socially productive channels. All myths, he concluded in Totem and Taboo (1913), dramatise the basic Oedipal situation or "family romance", and are regressive versions of that story, refusals to articulate it in its pristine form. Myth is "a fragment preserved from the infantile psychic life of the race, and dreams are the myths of the individual."⁵ It was his quarrel with the pansexualism of Freud's definition which was to lead Jung to his historic break with psychoanalysis.

One striking feature of the early psychoanalytic treatment of myth was the process of condensation which resulted. Psychoanalysis reduced the enormous diversity of mythic narratives to a single basic syndrome, equated with a neurotic condition of the mind. We have here the emergence of a monomyth: a single, fundamental, primigenial narrative from which all subsequent myths derive through elaboration and evasion. For Freud the monomyth was that of Oedipus, whereas for Frazer it was that of the dying-and-rising god. Earlier thinkers had learnt less self-consciously upon monomyths of their own, such as solar mythology or the priority of Genesis. The marriage of anthropology and psychology revived the idea of a monomyth with new persuasive force because it seemed to unite so effectively the inner life of the individual and the ceremonial life of the community. Myth could now be regarded as a legitimate means of integrating the injured psyche of the individual with everything that was conceived as of absolute and transcendent value in the storehouse of human wisdom,

as an objective correlative of the realm of the dream, where the process of conflict and resolution worked itself out by breaking down the raw materials of psychobiography to form new elements, new steps in the progress towards psychic health.

Psychoanalysis and myth appeared also to share a symbolic language of height and depth. Both scorned the surface appearance of things, intent upon plumbing the depths of experience in order to disinter a reality obscured by repression and convention. To many engaged in this exercise in the post-World-War climate of economic collapse, political confusion, and philosophic relativism, the reality thus perceived appeared bleakly barbaric. The conscious operations of the ego and the classical equipoise of mythology disguised the remorseless and violent forces which lurked beneath the veneer of everyday life, and which the holding actions of ritual and storytelling barely contained on behalf of civilization. An event such as the Great War, according to this form of reasoning, laid bare the savagery at the root of human endeavour which modern man no longer possessed any means of redirecting.

Optimistic and pessimistic accounts of the modern age could each draw sustenance from the common ground occupied by anthropology and psychoanalysis. If the ritual theory seemed to re-emphasize the role of violent, elemental forces in humanity's interactions with its environment, then that violence was itself read symptomatically by some as a sign of the vitality and organic unity with the non-human world which primitive societies had enjoyed. Nietzsche had argued this understanding of myth most eloquently in The Birth of Tragedy,⁶ a work which despite its faulty, outdated methodology continued to exercise a fascination for writers until well into the twentieth century.

Nietzsche held, famously, that tragedy was a synthesis of two types

of art: the Apollonian and the Dionysiac. It is the expression of Dionysiac powers and insights in Apollonian form. The Apollonian is the sphere of individuation, restraint, form, beauty, illusion. Though Apollonian images seem to offer higher truth, they are and remain mere appearance.

However, in a state of intoxication an individual loses himself. This is the basis of the Dionysiac experience: the collapse of individuation. In his Dionysiac state a man feels that all barriers between himself and others are broken in favour of a rediscovered universal harmony. At the centre of Dionysiac religion was the mystic evocation of nature's awesome unity, the primal unity concealed by our dismemberment into individuals, and the worshippers' yearning for a recovery of that unity. In the cult-song to Dionysus, the dithyramb, the potent Dionysiac music and the accompanying movements of the dance symbolised the agony and the joy of this aspiration. Music was for Nietzsche the language of Will, of primal being, the One, and this belief led him to claim that Greek tragedy originated in lyric poetry. Lyric poetry is primarily musical: the lyric poet is a Dionysiac artist who surrenders his egoistic subjectivity to identify himself with the true metaphysical reality and reflect it in music.

Apollonian art represents the sublimation of suffering into beauty, the formation of a beautiful illusion to conceal the painful truth, the Dionysiac truth, that the underlying reality of existence is unchanging contradiction, pain and excess, represented to our immediate experience as the 'curse' of individuation - our subjection as impotent individuals to the change and suffering that befall us from birth to inevitable death.

The ideas of the lyric poet, on the other hand, are projections of himself, but a self indistinguishable from the ground of being with which the poet is now one. The lyric poet as artist is released

from his individual will and becomes a medium through which the ground of being makes itself manifest: "Only as an aesthetic phenomenon can existence and the world be eternally justified."⁷

Greek tragedy, Nietzsche claimed, leaves its audience with the feeling that, despite all superficial changes, life is at bottom indestructably joyful and powerful. In its presence, the audience could feel its civilized surface stripped away, to be replaced by a consoling sense of unity with nature. The reason why the Greeks should have needed such consolation was that in their Dionysiac ecstasies they had looked into the painful essence of life. They had come face to face with its essential horror and absurdity - and overcome them.⁸

The idiosyncrasies of Nietzsche's interpretation of the origins of tragedy effectively ensured his separation from the mainstream developments of anthropology at the close of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, his theory of the Dionysiac formed an important bridge between anthropology and poetry because it harboured a view of myth which justified the role of the artist himself. Nietzsche restored the link between the act of poetic creation and the ancient ceremonial power of ritual, a power which language is itself reported to have traditionally possessed. In Nietzsche's view, through his articulation of myth, the poet may be regarded as participating in an elevated, ecstatic and potentially magical experience not limited to the historical conditions of Greek tragedy, and directly relevant to the needs of the modern world because "Myth alone can preserve the faculties of the imagination from the incoherence of a purposeless activity."⁹

In the intellectual confusion which prevailed after the Great War, it was, perhaps, this Nietzschean capacity of myth for uniting man with non-rational modes of thinking and being which exercised the greatest fascination for writers. This was another feature of myth's doubleness. At one and the same time, it could be employed

to satisfy the artist's yearning for order (Eliot's "mythical method") while also affording a liberated sense of dynamic movement and energy, through, for example, its hierarchical, cosmological disposition of psychic and natural impulses in dramatic or narrative shape. The combined application of anthropology and psychology to myth succeeded in elevating it to the status of a form of consciousness in its own right, one which seemed to be genuinely archaic, rooted in the deepest traditions of civilization, but also revolutionary in its apprehension of the shaping forces of modernity. Mythical images were not to be regarded simply as clothing for abstract thought, but more directly as possessed of a radiance or nimbus associated uniquely with objects immemorially caught in the nexus between community and power.

These qualities, when transferred to imaginative writing, appeared to deliver literature from bondage to a kind of realism which had inadequately registered the range of human experience, and which the impact of the Great War had finally shattered. The return to mythology restored to writers a repertoire of motifs unavailable to standard realism; principally those archetypes derived from the life-cycle of the hero and the cosmological forces by which he was thought to be surrounded: creation, dismemberment, rebirth, metamorphosis and apocalypse - elements which re-established a fluent intercourse between human, chthonic and celestial influences. Once this ancient pattern was re-legitimised for modern art, all kinds of secondary motifs proliferated to consolidate myth as a medium for acquiring some direct and profound engagement with the malaise of the modern world: the waste land, the fire-festival, the sacred king, the Great Mother, the sparagmos, the night-sea journey, the slaying of the dragon, the scape-goat, the dying-and-rising god, the Grail Quest, the wounding of Adonis, the Sleeping Lord, the shaman, the

cycles of the seasons and fertility, the folklore of the Dark Ages, the Mari Llywd etc etc.

If these items read like a taxonomy of modern poetry, then this perhaps bears out Christopher Nash's judgement on the literary impact of the great anthropological and psychological theorists "that it is in the mass of integrated images of which the mammoth canon of their interpretive work is composed, and not in their hypotheses, that they have given the vision back to mythology."¹⁰ At the collective level, this mass of images could be used to probe the dangers, frustrations and failures of the post-war world. At the individual level it could be used to marshal the fragments of a shattered psyche, resolving them into a coherent and dynamic whole through which the dilemmas of the age might be interpreted anew.

Poetry as Therapy

Robert Graves set out his response to the interaction of myth, psychology and his own personal post-war disorders in two works: On English Poetry (1922) and Poetic Unreason (1925). We have already noted how his acquaintance with the theories of W.H.R. Rivers led Graves to his own personal exploration of the region where psychology and anthropology overlap, a region where the composition of verse was closely identified with the practice of primitive religion. Behind this intuition lay Graves' growing conviction that poetry was essentially a form of psychotherapy, whereby the creation of the poem objectified and then resolved specific neurotic conditions.

In the chronicle of Goodbye To All That Graves set out in detail the symptomatology of his neurasthenia, the consequence of a dreadful combat fatigue which had only exacerbated neurotic tendencies in his personal make-up.¹¹ His subsequent reflections upon the nature of poetic inspiration drew him towards a version of Freud sanitised

by Rivers' evasion of the sexual dynamic at the root of the unconscious. The source of the writer's internal conflict is, in Graves' view, immaterial. It is simply the presence of conflict itself which predisposes the psyche to produce poetry because...

Poetry as the Greeks knew...is a form of psychotherapy. Being the transformation into dream symbolism of some disturbing emotional crisis in the poet's mind...poetry has the power of homeopathically healing other men's minds similarly troubled by presenting them under the spell of hypnosis with an allegorical solution of the trouble. Once the allegory is recognized by the reader's unconscious mind as applicable the affective power of his own emotional crisis is diminished.¹²

The view of psychotherapy Graves presents here is double-edged. Talk of dream-symbolism, allegory, and the homeopathic bond between poet and audience draws him close to the language of myth and to the role of the shaman-medicine-man figure. But this coexists with a much simpler mechanistic account of the creation and functioning of poetry which owes its origin to Rivers' conflict model, the view of the disturbed patient's warring sub-personalities vying with one another for control of the psyche, an idea which has only the faintest resemblance to Freud's theories. Although clothed in reverence for the unconscious, this mechanistic version of inspiration is, in fact, remarkably urbane and objective, requiring that the poet simply perform certain tasks to ensure the smooth functioning of the machinery of literary creation; akin to Eliot's view of the poet's imagination "constantly amalgamating disparate experience":¹³

The poet is consciously or unconsciously always either taking in or giving out...new ideas...and then two of them violently quarrel and drag into the fight a group of other ideas that have been loitering about at the back of his mind for years; there is...noise and bloodshed with finally a reconciliation and drinks all round. The poet writes a report...and there is the poem.¹⁴

In this little psychodramatic vignette the conflict model receives its most refined understatement, the "noise and bloodshed" of the quarrel effectively masked by the final image of drawing-room reconciliation and the highly prosaic definition of the final literary outcome, the register of which ("a report") seems oddly inappropriate for either the struggle which preceded it or for the balance of forces contained in lyric poetry.

Combining these homeopathic, conflict and mechanistic definitions of poetry proved enormously problematic for Graves. The impulse to confer a special spiritual status upon the poet, who relates to his audience via the spell of hypnosis, is matched by a countervailing tendency towards pure subjectivity, which reduces poetry to an unalloyed functional, anodynic role in the life of the writer. Rather than opening up access to deeper bonds of consciousness and feeling, dream-symbolism has a similarly functional part to play in transferring the psychotherapeutic properties of verse from writer to reader or audience. Myth and psychology find themselves in tension in this aesthetic because the psychology is determinedly cognitive and relativistic. Poetry is seen primarily "as a physician of...mental disorders"¹⁵ and "bad" poetry may only be defined as "Yours when I do not understand you and when your work has no help to offer me in my troubles."¹⁶ "Badness" and "goodness" are terms applicable only to individuals and moments, leading inevitably to the view that "it is not possible to lay down absolute canons of criticism which favour one poem and damn the next."¹⁷

The theory manages to preserve a premium for the non-rational bonds of poetry not only in the title of the second book, but also in the distinction applied throughout between classical and romantic modes, very similar to Nietzsche's separation of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac. Graves insists that it is the illogical, metamorphic,

romantic composition that is best equipped to neutralize subconscious disorder. The distinction goes part way to reasserting the unique epistemology of myth because it recognizes the inadequacy of the "new age of classicism" in which we live, and in which logic and order prevail:

Poetry of the kind we recognize as Romantic...
 being, as Coleridge first showed, dependent upon
 associative thought, its symbolism intimately
 bound up with a vast number of logical false
 premises, a defiance of the ordered spatio-
 temporal structure...this Poetry when Logic was
 first achieving pre-eminence...had to be banned...
 or had to submit itself to a severe examination
 and systemization - hence Aristotle's Poetics.¹⁸

The elevation of the romantic, non-rational impulse, shored up by a tendentious pseudo-history, saves poetry for the quickening properties of myth, which also depend upon associative thought and defy the ordered spatio-temporal structure. From Freud, through Rivers, Graves had learned that the production of poetry was analagous to the production of dreams, and that before the analyst could establish the real significance of a dream he had to first separate it from its "secondary elaborations" i.e. the conscious narrative order imposed on it by the dreamer while in the process of recounting it. The same, Graves states, holds true for poetry: before the critic can determine a poem's true meaning and value he must filter its original, unconscious sense from the sediment of secondary elaboration the poet has accrued in making it "a grammatical entity, a piece of history, a rhyme-scheme, a piece of word-music;"¹⁹ to make it conform, in other words, to some common-sense standard of order. Classical poetry is that which exists solely for the sake of the intellectual concept embodied in a predetermined form; it is all secondary elaboration: it has no core of inspiration. Only purely romantic poetry, existing anterior to, and independent of, any logical system, will reward

the reader with a glimpse of eternal, universal values.

It is this facet of Graves' early psychogenic theories which facilitates the fusion of psychology and myth in his imaginative writing. Despite the mechanistic account of inspiration, the theories are saved from reductionism by the priority they accord to the non-rational, oneiromantic properties of poetry. The meeting of poetry, psychology and myth which this permits is forcibly conveyed in the poem "The Poet's Birth".²⁰

The situation described by the poem relates closely to those views of Graves which produced the naïve pastoralism of some of his escapist war time verse. The poet begins by seeking solutions to the problem of his creative origins by speculating upon the part played by parentage in their formation. The "page...hunter, and priest of God", each "claiming the sole parenthood/Of him the perfect crown of their variety", betoken the ambiguity in Graves' attitude to the psychology of the creative dynamic, particularly the debt owed to fathers, heredity, precursors, forebears of all sorts out of whose actions the identity of the poet may or may not have originated.

The ambiguity and the redundancy of the claims of the putative fathers are matched only by the large reassurances of the poet's mother. Her disregard for the identity of the poet's biological father is attributed to a vaguely innocent promiscuity ("she loved too well") which prompts the concentration of all the dimensions of the family network into the unitary bond between herself and her son. She aspires to a parental sufficiency which betrays a disturbingly possessive fixation with the binary relationship of herself and the child.

Graves here experiments with a psychological emblem of the disturbed infantile relations which lay the foundation for those conflict situations which he believed, at this stage of his career, were the background to poetic inspiration. The fact that the centre

of gravity in the poem is an all-bountiful, identifiable mother set apart from a series of inconsequential claimant fathers may be interpreted as an excessive dependence on the maternal sustenance. This, in turn, may be read, in psychoanalytic terms, as a perceived inadequacy in the father which leads to the infantile preoccupation with the mother as the repository of all beneficence. The poem turns upon the psychic sufficiency of the mother figure as the source of the poet's life and of his continued nurture. It proceeds to develop this conviction by the more accurate characterisation of the mother in relation to the forms of devotion she lavishes on the child:

"But many-fathered little one," she said,
 "Whether of high or low, of smooth or rough,
 Here's your mother whom you brought to bed.
 Acknowledge only me, be this enough..."

Something of the morbidity of the relationship begins to emerge at this point reflecting a new overtone of possessiveness on to the earlier explanation that the mother "loved too well." Similarly, "brought to bed" as a euphemism for parturition has more sinister connotations if read as an indication of the mother's projection of all her libidinous needs and offerings on to the child.

The poet's birth appears as a consequence of the pathology of promise and admonition which arises out of the peculiar relationship between mother and son. The mother's neurotic insistence that the child "Acknowledge only me" induces the kind of emotional conflict which Graves had claimed in his prose was the first cause of poetry. It solidifies the relationship into a kind of icon of madonna and child within which the child's recompense for this singleminded devotion is to become himself an object of "worship":

For such as worship after shall be told
 A white dove sired you or a rain of gold."

Graves' interrogation of the "family romance" which Freud claimed was the basis of all romance is only partially accomplished using this brand of psychological allegory. The situation which the poem attempts to dramatise presses beyond the boundaries of a psychoanalytic narrative and slips almost irresistibly into the language of myth. The conflict model will not suffice. The search for origins within the framework of infantile obsessions delineated by the psychoanalytic account of literary invention provides a vocabulary whose motifs share the same genealogy as myth. The mother's efforts to compensate for illegitimacy and the absence of the father issue in wish-fantasies which imprint upon the child a sense of his own quasi-divinity using the imagery of the Annunciation and of the siring of Perseus on his mother Danae by Zeus. Once again, mythology and psychology are seen to be isomorphic. But what began as a fairly transparent allegory of the Freudian family romance is hijacked, as it were, by its own imagery and ends in remythologising the basic situation and the characters involved, transforming the poet into a demi-god and the mother into a maternal goddess who sponsors the nascent poet's sense of his own uniqueness. We have here what Campbell would call a nuclear mythic image from which a much larger system of ideas will be built.

It would appear that the element which exercised Graves' imagination, common to both psychology and mythology, and which secured the eclipsing of the former by the latter in his work was fantasy. What the language of psychoanalysis read pejoratively as the neurotic condition fantasy, a more ancient language could read as mythopoesis, a non-logical form of unreason which gave access to primitive forms of awareness which could be used to cast new veils of meaning over questions of personal identity and collective purpose. In another early poem, "Virgil the Sorcerer",²¹ Graves probed more deeply into the implications of thinking mythically, as opposed to psycho-

analytically, exploring the interface at which myth met a reproachful and dismissive reality.

The poem is important more as a statement of Graves' commitment to the poetic career than as an elevation of one aesthetic at the expense of another. But the antithesis of classic and romantic, Apollonian and Dionysiac, rational and associative, is implied throughout.

He begins with a very revealing rejection of Virgil Maro, "the suave hexamerist", foremost poet of ancient Rome, whom he portrays as a calculating servant of the classical mode. Perhaps because of the elevated place this Virgil occupied in the Latin heritage of the public school system he so despised, Graves reviles him in a gesture he will amplify in his later criticism. The Virgil of the Aeneid, at even this very early stage of Graves' career, is shunted off to share the same fate as "Monstrous Milton", each of them, for reasons as yet obscure, regarded as great threatening presences hovering on the margins of the young poet's creativity, exerting their own peculiar brand of the anxiety of influence.

We have already touched briefly upon Graves' ambivalence towards literary tradition and its pattern of influence. In "John Skelton" we saw how he overcame his fears by locating himself in a counter-tradition of literary eccentricity. Just as, in the earlier poem, Graves opposed the influence of "Monstrous Milton" with John Skelton, so now he retaliates against Virgil's reputation by opposing him with the legend of Virgil of Toledo, the twelfth-century sorcerer whose adventures dramatise the confrontation between mythopoesis and restrictive, rational versions of reality.

In the legend, the unjustly imprisoned Virgil drew a ship on his cell wall and invited his fellow-prisoners to board it as a means of escape:

...They stepped from solid ground,

Climbed into phantasy and with a cheer
Heaved anchor, bent their oars, pulled without stop...

Here, without disillusion, all were free.

Graves makes no secret of the fact that the story is an "allegory", but goes on to claim: "What Virgil did can yet again be done." Within the allegory's frame of reference, the poet is revealed as a prisoner trapped by impoverished accounts of reality, with poetry as the means of escape for him and his fellow-sufferers for whom reality has become incarceration. The mythopoeic properties of verse can be compared to a principle of release which liberates the recipient from bondage to the predatory claims of reason. The lesson of the allegory is summed up in a magical formula: "Poetry is a spell of furious power", and this prompts Graves to reflect upon the elements of Virgil's solution that are relevant to the condition of all poets.

The imagery of captain, ship and crew becomes allegorical of the poet, poetry and his audience: "A crew shall board her, stamping with delight./...And the round world shall marvel at our flight." The status of the poet himself is seen to be determined by his position in relation to all the other elements which constitute the allegory. The poet performs as the bringer of bounty or the leader of the quest: "...my spells shall give,/Fruit after famine, sunrise after dark." Poetry, specifically that kind of poetry which challenges realist accounts of experience, is elevated to the sphere of magic, a process which seems to reconnect man with centres of awareness unconstrained by the limitations of the senses and presided over by the shaman-figure of the poet.

Doubt creeps into the poem as a scepticism regarding the poet's ability to sustain this burdensome vocation. The tone is reflective and self-chastening:

Vanity: for proud resolution drops.
 We are not Virgils, but one night in twenty:
 When we should step our masts we trundle hoops:
 Art is most rare though boasts of art are plenty.

The need to use poetry as a means of subverting the empirical account of experience makes demands of the writer's creativity which he cannot hope to sustain. This is one of the central difficulties of the mythopoeic mode, and it enters the verse in the form of what Bloom terms "the crisis lyric",²² in which the poet saves himself for the next essay into myth, and for at least the possibility of a fuller life in which the limitations of reason are overcome. Uncertainty as to his own powers is compounded for Graves by a characteristic meditation upon the achievements and failures of past poetry, "searching dated annals" for scanty evidence of precursors whose mythopoeic ambitions, like Virgil's, might inspire his own work.

The poem finishes on a note of irresolution, the feats of Virgil serving only to menace Graves with the spectre of self-defeat. The boundaries of time, circumstance and mortality combine to disable his flight from the circumscribing claims of reason and the limitations of the senses. Finally, the poem collapses into "The unmoving present", the mythic *nisus* unable to overcome "Time the limiter" who "wears us to rags." Although the activity of Virgil the sorcerer is paradigmatic of the freedom from logic and reason to which poetry should aspire, his example has at this point succeeded only in reminding Graves of the limitations of his own poetry, and the difficulties which stand in the way of fidelity to the mythical method.

Exile and the Pastoral

The compelling feature for Graves in the legend of Virgil the Sorcerer was the use of poetry as a means of escape from imprisonment within a restrictive version of reality limited to the operation

of reason and the senses. The unreason of poetry, Graves felt, offered a richer commerce between the self and the outside world, particularly when that self had been so seriously damaged by the failures of a culture founded upon reason and the empirical method.

In the years following his war service, Graves' neurasthenia came increasingly to alienate him from his surrounding culture. This was a process which, as we have seen, had begun in the doomed community of the front-line soldiers, who had felt themselves to be cut off from the sphere of non-combatants, even those sympathetic to their plight. It continued for Graves when the war ended, in the rejection of the values of the military-bourgeoise establishment and the religion of his mother.²³ Coupled with his combat-fatigue and profound sense of guilt went a broadening awareness of the underlying causes of the great misfortune through which he and his comrades had come. This further intensified both his isolation and his bitterness towards what he believed was a defunct culture, adrift from its moorings, placing too high a premium on inductive reasoning, cut off from its traditional sources of feeling and sensitivity. In his little-known play But It Still Goes On Graves has one of the characters say:

It's too late for amending the world now; the bottom has fallen out of it. The Sunday journalists and the Church of course all pretend that it hasn't, and everyone else plays up to them. But it's no good. It's finished; except that it still goes on.²⁴

The ability to penetrate this contradiction, exposing the self-deception of a bankrupt civilization, belonged to the poet, whose adherence to a species of truth higher than that available to mere reason enabled him to trace the deeper pattern of disintegration unfolding at the centre of the post-war culture. However, the price of acquiring

this special insight was, Graves believed, to suffer further marginalisation of the poet and his art, of the sort depicted in the lengthy satire "The Marmosite's Miscellany".²⁵

As if to highlight the ironic predicament of the poet and his reception by a hostile and ignorant world, the marmosite of the title is a curious ape-like creature locked up as a public exhibit in a cage, yet equipped with the rationality to take as much interest in his onlookers as they do in him: "I find it no hardship; after all, I see/At least as much of mankind as they do of me." This is an ironic variation of the Virgil theme. The poet is confined by his talent to an existence which the rest of the world regards as foreign and non-human. But whereas Virgil had used his creative powers to escape imprisonment, it is the very possession of those powers which condemns the marmosite to his cage. The one consolation is that imprisonment allows him to observe the drama of contemporary humanity from an objective, dispassionate stance.

As the allegory unfolds, the marmosite documents his impressions of the world around him. The discrepancy between what is said and what is done induces in him a scepticism towards religion and philosophic belief. He sees religion as posturing, and, when he reflects upon human history, can only regard man's repeated transgressions against his own ethical systems as a black comedy of failed aspirations. Throughout his survey, the marmosite avoids nihilism but stresses that his distance from contemporary reality enables him to see things "calmly in a clear light". For instance, he reveres God "but not from any pew," thereby avoiding damage to his objectivity through contact with theological dogma.

Disgust with the world prompts the marmosite to search more and more hopelessly for groups or individuals who might be "touched with originality." Eventually he concludes that only maniacs are so blessed;

or, to be more precise, lunatics, because only "The Moon is the Mistress of escape and pity." These words echo the impulse of Virgil's art, which was to secure escape from the prisonhouse of reality. But they mark a development of the idea because they ascribe the desire for escape to a tutelar female divinity personified as the Moon. This lunar female figure appears in vague outline as the sponsor of the forms of poetic introspection which separate the poet from his surrounding environment and free him from dependence upon reality. The motive for escape is thus objectified and neurotic disorder superseded as the source of inspiration.

The marmosite proceeds to relate a fable of his own attempt to ally himself to the sovereignty of the moon and everything it symbolizes. The moon, he claims, commands a "silver city", which he describes as a prelapsarian erotic paradise resembling, for example, Spenser's Bower of Bliss or Blake's Beulah, accessible only to a visionary few, and characterized by uninhibited sexual freedom and pastoral repose. The marmosite's flight of fantasy here recapitulates the withdrawal of Graves into the sphere of nursery-pastoral in the face of trench warfare. Just as the soldier-poet sought refuge for his injured psyche in pastoral and nursery verse only to find them invaded by the violent forces from which he was in flight in the first place, so the marmosite's fancy takes him to a world far removed from the crassness of common-sense reality. But his allegory within an allegory also harbours a strong element of disillusionment which is revealed when he discovers that the Muses who inhabit the silver city have given their blessing to 'neoclassical' poetry and scorn the 'romantic' instinctual poetry the marmosite champions. "We serve a lost cause", moans the marmosite, "does only pride remain/In prolonging tradition beyond its due time?" This lament is characteristic of Graves' alienation from his culture: even poetry has been polluted by the rationalist

spirit of the age, and its custodial institutions refuse to sanction that which Graves believes to be the only authentic mode in which true poetry can be written.

But another legacy of the part played by war in his character-formation is evident in the closing stages of this poem. The marmosite refuses to accept that his verse is no longer meaningful to a rational age, and falls back on the endurance which was another aspect of Graves' reaction to adversity:

"The beginning of wisdom is laughter and song,
The furtherance of wisdom, scholarship and groans.
Between first and second, reactions are strong;
The disputants wrangle in no playful tones,
Dream against waking, blood against bones:
Let poetry, then, enter on its third degree
In grammar of unreason marching close and free."

This coda to the poem contains much of the vocabulary from which Graves will go on to develop his own version of the monomyth: "wisdom", "dream against waking", "blood" and the resonant "grammar of unreason". The marmosite argues, as had Graves in his earlier writings, for a poetry born out of conflict, principally the conflict between the rational, conscious level and those deeper deposits of awareness which only dream and poetry can actuate. Poetry is a kind of tertium quid negotiating a meaningful commerce between the different levels and healing the divisions between them. But the stance taken by true poetry and true poets has itself no compromise about it. Poetry is constructed firmly in the "grammar of unreason", the language of modes of feeling and awareness which are too ancient and intractable to bear the analysis of unaided reason.

In the marmosite's closing declaration, Graves initiates his quarrel with the complex of ideas that he subsumes under the rubric of reason and which he will later hypostatize as the supreme antagonist of poetry. That the marmosite uncovers this grammar in a realm of

artificial pastoral is a function of his exile from contemporary culture, which is a consequence of, and punishment for, the poetic vocation. It is becoming clear by this point in Graves' work that poetry distances the elite consciousness of the writer from the confusion and positivism of the modern world and translates him to a realm where he can be free to rediscover ancient sources of vitality. This shift places Graves firmly within the shamanistic tradition and its defence of man's magical, as opposed to rational, soul. The silver city of the Lunar goddess is Graves' most developed version yet of the pastoral paradise which stands at odds with the domain of industrial, military man and his divorce from the natural. As he fled the trenches and warfare and their neurasthenic legacy, escaping to the remote fastnesses of North Wales, Graves began to redefine the relationship between his poetry and the various forms of nature, charting a change in style which was to be the literary parallel to the endless hill-walks which were the main feature of his recuperation.

The violence and horror which had invaded the seemingly innocent nursery verse he wrote to soothe the pain of the trenches, continued to stalk the poetry Graves composed amidst the heights and depths of Wales. In Goodbye To All That Graves records how the presence of war continued to colour his perceptions: the faces of dead comrades would be seen on passers-by walking down a busy street, and hills would be reconnoitred to assay their military or strategic significance. Above all, a sense of guilt at having survived a conflict in which so many had perished pervaded his thoughts, peopling the poetry with numerous ghostly presences, and exporting into nature itself a ruin and disturbance correlative with the destructive upheavals of war.²⁶

In "The Haunted House"²⁷ the persona of the poet speaks in the first

of many minstrel voices, employing a ballad metre and the diction of folktale to rebel against his audience's demand for the verse trivialities of "flowers and butterflies". The shadowy audience and the crazed poet confront each other in a house haunted by "the clouded tales of wrong/and terror" which it seems only the poet wishes to remember, the house functioning as the first of many spectral buildings in which Graves will dramatise his inner feelings of guilt and remorse. Poetry cannot concern itself, argues the poet, with commonplace escapism when the world around it abounds in images and memories of lust and violence. "...What laughter or what song/Can this house remember?" he asks, rejecting a debased pastoralism as the vehicle of poetic truth.

Graves' sense of guilt, and his anxieties concerning the place of poetry in a world out of which "the bottom has fallen" were, at this point, only partially assuaged by the consolations of nature. Walking on hills may have been a form of therapy for him in the slough of his despond, but as the vague yet threatening presence in "Reproach"²⁸ emphasises, nature could accuse as well as comfort, the poet's anxieties investing the disrupted vista with all his apparently motiveless intuitions of guilt. The accusations of having been "unkind, untrue, you brand me both" find no rational cause in the poet's memory, but this serves only to deepen their impact, and neither the imagery of pastoral nor the refuge of childhood afford any protection:

The black trees shudder, dropping snow,
The stars tumble and spin.
Speak, speak, or how may a child know
His ancestral sin?

These post-war neurotic obsessions with having in some sense committed an act of betrayal in a mythical, infantile past place the resources of the pastoral under enormous pressure. The language

of psychology would have defined the conflict purely in terms of a guilt complex common to many survivors of war. But Graves needed to resolve the tension in terms of the symbolic landscapes of his poetry if he was to survive as a writer. The Georgian poetic had failed to insulate him adequately from the horrors of war. But his new-found faith in the status of poetry as a form of knowledge transcending the merely rational lent new impetus to the pastoral rhetoric of his verse. Graves required a redefinition of pastoral myth powerful enough to take up violence, suffering and guilt into his imagination. He began to discover it in these early explorations of nature as a material projection of poetic consciousness. One of the catalysts for this process appeared, quite literally, with "The Finding of Love".²⁹ "Pale at first and cold", the experience of love passes over the pastoral landscape as a "blaze" of energy, at once both purging and quickening the scene, the imagery of the poem shifting from gloom to light and from cold to heat. This love is not a childish comfort for the vicissitudes of experience. It is an overpowering force cognate with the life-giving properties of spring and nature's self-renewal. Under its influence, the pastoral landscape rises to a fresh vitality with far-reaching consequences for the poet's emotional life: "With end to grief,/With joy in steadfastness."

The discovery of love did not, of course, import anything alien into the pastoral aesthetic. But it did allow Graves to begin the transformation of his verse because it entailed a renegotiation of the relations between the self and nature. If myth is concerned essentially with the transformation of the natural into the human, then it was the advent of this romantic mythology of love which advanced Graves' early poetry most markedly. Love perceived as a dynamic influence, sharing the anti-rational bias of poetry and myth, provided a new means of resolving conflict without forfeiting the vitality required

for further poetic creation. Graves' symbolic landscapes now begin to take on a subtly different colour. The exceptionally virile concept of love, identified with the blind yet wondrous forces of natural renewal, affords an opportunity for Graves to attempt next the assimilation of violence to his sensuous rendering of nature.

"Rocky Acres"³⁰ shows what a far more problematic endeavour this was. Here, the poet sketches in the rudiments of a paysage moralise, a moral landscape unsullied by the transactions of the post-war world, preserving the self-contained wholeness of the pastoral sphere whilst simultaneously enabling the poet to comment upon the corruption of the times. His position sets him apart from "the far plains below" both in terms of altitude and level of perception:

This is a wild land, country of my choice,
With harsh craggy mountain, moor ample and bare.
Seldom in these acres is heard any voice
But voice of cold water that runs here and there
Through rocks and lank heather growing without care.
No mice in the heath run, no song-birds fly
For fear of the buzzard that floats in the sky.

The diction is consciously austere and harsh; the poet's control of the difficult rhyme royal reflects his control of the disposition of elements in the landscape, whose watchword is cruelty. It is a landscape purged of the human presence and of the gentler bucolic aspects of the pastoral, their absence compressed into a series of resounding negatives: "Seldom...any voice...no mice...no song-birds". But this is a structured absence, felt in the traces of voices and animals left in the poet's language. Emptying the landscape so deliberately in this way opens up an expanse of countryside which is, in effect, a psychological terrain, the perpetually remote ground of a 'lost' wholeness which is presented as the place of plenitude because of its receptivity to the poet's inner dilemmas.

Graves displaces the poet's viewpoint on to the predatory figure

of the buzzard, a gesture which allows distance and participation to be held in tension:

He soars and he hovers, rocking on his wings,
 He scans his wide parish with a sharp eye,
 He catches the trembling of small hidden things,
 He tears them in pieces, dropping them from the sky;
 Tenderness and pity the heart will deny.

The Skeltonic rhythm focuses attention on the first stressed verb in each line: "soars", "scans", "catches", "tears", effectively animating the progress of the kill. It is not the majesty of the bird which appeals to the speaker, unlike, for example, Tennyson's "Eagle", but the fact that he embodies the impassive law of a land in which the subjectivity of the poet merges with the impersonal aggression of the natural order. A closer literary relative of this particular bird might be found among Ted Hughes' hawks or the blind beasts of Peter Redgrove, creatures whose hypertrophy might be quite reasonably aligned with Graves' buzzard.

The country of Graves' choice, then, is no longer the sequestered grove of childhood fancy and war time escapism, but a landscape dominated by images of violence, and the omniscient gaze of the predator. The machine ferocity of the battlefield has been absorbed by an environment where cruelty assumes the logic of natural process, where it is the way of things, where primordial values sanction "fear", "shock", and "terror" because the poet has freely chosen to set aside conventional morality, and seeks to identify himself with a will-to-power abstracted from his account of the operations of nature. Whether this is to live authentically, or whether it is simply to submit to an amoral animism perceived to be the ruling agency of the cosmos, is arguable.

Many of Graves' poems of this period are haunted by a nostalgia for a realm of being in which the feudal, the archaic and the prehistoric

are associated with the instinctual and automatic, with a brutal realm of primary responses which, as in the brief poem "Outlaws"³¹, is identified with the most ancient and abiding recesses of the psyche. Here "Old gods almost dead, malign", inhabit the boundaries of consciousness and civilized behaviour, liminal figures who menace the stability of the pastoral by recalling its proximity to the chthonic terrors of the wilderness, night, prehistory and the distant reaches of the unconscious mind, where "These aged gods of power and lust/Cling to life yet". The territory of this realm stretches back to a primordial past, and downward into the repressed emotions over which the rational man wields unsteady restraint. But it also exercises a fascination for the poet, in part because it challenges the vain claims of technological civilization, and in part because it reunites the poet with a vast fund of mythological motifs where poetry, power and religion intersect.

With thunder from an open sky
 To warrior, virgin, priest,
 Bowing in fear with a dazzled eye
 Toward the dread East -

As "Rocky Acres" makes clear, the mythos of these poems is, in fact, a recherche for a lost unity of being preceding the modern era, before the world war overthrew, as if for good, the natural hierarchy. This hierarchy of sense and instinct is inscribed in the contours of the land, where its characters spell out an uncompromising lesson for the "far plains below." The "fat burghers" may be, as Douglas Day suggests, a more or less direct reference to the entrepreneurial class which made its fortune on the back of the war profits.³² But in its wider connotations it embraces all the petit-bourgeois sentiments which Graves felt had accumulated to fill the post-war power vacuum, where an active but disorganised proleteriat

had failed to take the political initiative from a moribund aristocracy before the middle-class compromise was arrived at. The essential ambivalence of myth responds to this impasse by rejecting the authority structures of technological democracy, but eschews egalitarianism in favour of a hopeless yearning for the lost hierarchies of feudal power.

Love and violence are drawn into Graves' pastoral poetry from this point, existing in an uneasy tension, vying with one another to be the antidote to his feelings of guilt. Fragments of a drama of love found and lost, of betrayal and murder, of dark trysts and fear, are spoken by a series of voices and personae who pass over the haunted landscape, propelled by the still unresolved conflicts in the poet's mind. " 'Who was it said "I love you?" ' " asks one voice, intruding into some undisclosed act of betrayal and receiving no reply.³³ Love offers no easy solution to the poet's dilemmas because it too is shot through with guilt at the baser feelings it stirs in his mind, and also because the vitality it undoubtedly imparts is nevertheless menaced by the fragility of the bonds upon which it depends. Just as love can be found in this terrain, so can it be lost, its "grief" intensifying the poet's sensitivity to the life and death processes of nature:

Clamour rings in his sad ear,
And noise so slight it would surpass
Credence - drinking sound of grass,
Worm talk, clashing jaws of moth
Chumbling holes in cloth.³⁴

This enlargement of the senses may be "god-like", but it turns the poet into a haunted, driven figure traversing the landscape "Without relief seeking lost love", reviving all his fears of madness.

The self encounters in these poems a vision of nature which is a dark alternative to the pathetic fallacy: the terrain mirrors and

responds to the disturbances of the psyche. We can therefore concur with D. Narayanswamy's observation that in this verse the psychological terrain "rendered a set of poetic aims inevitable and organically connected with (Graves') later mythological poetry."³⁵ But as well as understating Graves' relationship to nature, Narayanswamy does not seem to recognize the strong thread of self-defeat which runs through the verse of this period. Psychological allegory is shadowed forth much more fluently in the poems which stand at the opposite side of the dialectic between the self and experience, where Graves' images move inward and downward rather than outward into the plenitude of the natural vista. Stark, gothic-like buildings form a more yielding image of the drama of introspection than does the wilderness, where a diffuse subjectivity seeks an encounter with something outside itself.

In "The Pier-Glass",³⁶ a guilt-ridden murderess wanders through the rooms of a desolate mansion, a "puppet theatre where malignant fancy peoples the wings with guilt". Her pervasive sense of misery is powerfully conveyed in the dispersion of accents and the slow shifts and nuances of the blank verse. Vague images of disorder and ennui form an "Abstract, confusing welter" around her which the prospect of nature red in tooth and claw can do nothing to meaningfully interpret to her. The quality of interior self-analysis which the woman represents, the endlessly-repeated cycle of remorse acted out in a building which is the product of her fears, can find no solace in nature, and dwindles to a pitiful plea for "Hope, somewhere,/In streams, on sun-warm mountain pasturage". The original version of the poem³⁷ did not end on this entreaty, but moved on to a partial sublimity by meditating upon the blind impulses of a swarm of bees who act according to instinct rather than reason, their "Disquieting rhythm" lending "slow approbation" to the woman's past action: the

killing of an unfaithful lover. The suppression of the stanza reflected Graves' dissatisfaction with easy solutions, his preference for leaving the feeling of guilt to hang unresolved over his poetry.

The troubled persona in "Down"³⁸ registers the poet's descent into the deepest levels of his injured psyche, this time represented by a house filled with the lifeless residue of human presence: a clock, shutters, "Lost bars of music." The quality of semi-consciousness or reverie is suggested by the loose texture: short and long sentences, generous sprinklings of adjectives, the association of fragments of stray rhyme and assonance. Beneath "mattress, bed, floor, floors beneath, stairs, cellars/Through unturned earth" the poet delves into the subterranean reaches of his psyche where he encounters a realm of awareness with its own laws, where his profoundest anxieties originate out of combinations of experience inaccessible to rational enquiry. Bitterly, he compares the horror this realm now holds for him to the joyful ease with which, as a child, "he had dropped a stone between the slabs/That masked an ancient well, mysteriously/Plunging his mind down with it." The loss of the child's ability to commute freely between the layers of conscious and unconscious desire as the processes of adult reasoning take over, alienates the poet from the well-springs of his own emotion, and darkens the unconscious until in the hypnagogic state his mind is trapped in an endless downward momentum, "Falling, falling!" to the point of the self's extinction.

The existence of a parallel realm of irrational, illogical being, behind the pier-glass or "through the Palace/of Looking Glass" where "empty hearses turn about...Where Apuleius pastured his Gold Ass..." ("Alice"³⁹) exercised a regular pressure upon Graves' early poetry. It became a psychological version of the counter-world of the pastoral, existing in a similar opposition to the domain of empirical reality,

and harbouring the same mythological spectres from the regions of the unconscious and primitive religion. The problem for Graves lay in keeping open channels to this alternative universe without allowing the forces of unreason to overwhelm him with his own neurasthenic guilt.

Language became a key factor for him in safeguarding the vulnerability of the psyche. In "Down" the harrowed poet recalled how, as a child, he had "magicked space/With inadvertent motion or word uttered." In "Warning to Children",⁴⁰ the vertiginous movement in and out of the infinite regression of the duplicated scene is really concerned with the ability of language, the language of reason, to hold at bay "the greatness, rareness, muchness/Fewness of this precious only/Endless world." The semantic confusion reflects the potentially disruptive strength of unmediated experience which language and reason barely contain. What Graves terms the "cool web of language"⁴¹ exists in elliptical tension with the "grammar of unreason", protecting us "from too much joy or too much fear", excesses which result from direct exposure to what Alan Barker described as a "supra-rational, child-like dimension"⁴² in Graves' poetry, parallel to the universe of ordinary sense.

Yet contact with this dimension is defined in the verse as vital to psychic health. The difficulty for Graves lay in creating an aesthetic space where the experience of alternative realities, whether they existed in the unconscious mind or in the fictions of the pastoral, would liberate rather than oppress his spirit. He sought a terrain where violence could be celebrated without it crippling mind and body, where love would be freed from "What lusty dark alone might do" ("Children of Darkness"),⁴³ where the forces of the irrational would enlarge consciousness without unleashing the nightmare of guilt and insanity. All through this process, the poetry is dragged towards

the question left unanswered in "Children of Darkness": "Is Day prime error, that regret/For Darkness roars unstifled yet?" - a formula for the shaman's rejection of the light, and for his magical account of man's origins and destiny; the view that man is a stranger in a strange land, a child of the stars and the night exiled for some primordial crime to the world of material reality.

Graves' poetry hovers for a time over this solution to his dilemmas, partaking of a strange, paradoxical sense of exile which has strange affinities with the double-edged promise of myth. The title of the autobiography signals his final rejection of the culture which had bequeathed him only war and breakdown, and the urge towards pastoral withdrawal in his verse gradually becomes the dominant impulse of his moral imagination. More and more, poetry establishes itself for him as a mode of being, a way of living "against kind"⁴⁴ as he put it. So that, when the voice of Laura Riding cries prophetically "History is ended",⁴⁵ Graves feels compelled to make of his internal exile an explicit gesture.

We may regard exile as a leitmotif of modern literature. In his decision to leave England behind in the quest for a richer form of existence, Graves joined, however unwittingly, the adversary culture of international Modernism, that troop of deracinated wanderers somehow expressing a basic condition of the modern temperament. Graves' flight to the periphery, to the margins of officially-sanctioned experience, is closer to the style of, say, D.H. Lawrence or Roy Campbell, than it is to that of T.S. Eliot or Auden. Graves' is, in part at least, a subversive action, the gesture of an emigre mind gone to search for a cure to the contemporary malaise, or, in mythological terms, the dream-quest of the hero, to move beyond the boundaries of the given in order to discover the restricted assumptions on which it is based.

Stephen Daedalus, in his decision to leave Ireland, chose to adopt the camouflage of "silence, exile and cunning"⁴⁶ until he could establish a new ground for his humanism. Graves, an equally unrepentant rebel against received orthodoxy, had arrived at the belief that the world was a condition of the self to which the self should be personally, not socially, orientated. But his heretical stance was less secure, less ironically self-mocking than Stephen's, or, for that matter, Joyce's. No universal truth, least of all a faith in the redemptive power of art, could as yet command Graves' assent, and so he made a poetry of his confusion most often expressed in his favourite obsessive image: that of a man walking alone on hills:

To walk on hills is to employ legs
As porters of the head and heart
Jointly adventuring towards
Perhaps true equanimity.⁴⁷

Intermittently, at this stage, the rational Graves could doubt even the validity of the pastoral mode: "And the green country, should I turn again there?" fearing that it, too, might prove to be a vacuous place of the empty "Courtesies of good-morning and good-evening"⁴⁸. "Flying Crooked" and "In No Direction" record his awareness of his erratic, undecided stance, his misgivings about severing his ties with his land of origin, and his yearning for guidance:

To go in no direction
Surely as carelessly,
Walking on the hills alone,
I never found easy.⁴⁹

His only companion in this sojourn is the spectre of his own self-hood, appearing among the hills as "An eyeless ghost" in whose "no direction" he follows "Till my feet were lost".

But his ambivalence is best conveyed in the handful of poems dealing with the actual departure from England: "Quayside", "Brother" and

"The Cloak", all but the last subsequently suppressed by Graves, perhaps because they reflect uncertainties he later did not desire to recall.⁵⁰ "The Cloak" seeks to gloss over these uncertainties with an insouciance that makes the flight seem reasonable, predictable, inevitable:

... exile's but another name
For an old habit of non-residence
In all but the recesses of his cloak.
It was this angered a great personage.⁵¹

In assuming the persona of a decidedly aristocratic individual departing incognito, Graves reveals just how much his identity at this stage still depended upon roles underwritten by the Establishment he was supposedly repudiating. The cloak provides not anonymity, but a sign in the face of modernity of that feudal, aristocratic stature which continues to distinguish him from the masses. The choice of emblem once again indicates the extent of Graves' reliance on the nomenclature of high culture in defining his poetic status.

His withdrawal in 1929 to the remote mountain village of Deya in Majorca came to be interpreted by Graves as a return to the poet's true home, the place of a richer, fuller humanity freed from the ambiguities of the modern world and its accompanying ennui. He then reinterpreted his sojourn in the war and the shabby, materialistic 1920s as itself the real exile from which he had been released. Majorca, with its "Mediterranean contours, its clean austere surfaces",⁵² and its irreducible simplicities of the natural life, was to be the context of his vision, and the setting for his romantic mythology of love. This is the strange paradox of exile which is thrown up at the interface of Graves' life and art. Publicly, and in the language of his autobiography, exile was "my bitter leave-taking of England where I had recently broken a good many conventions...

and ceased to care what anyone thought of me."⁵³ Publicly, it was a rejection of the world emerging from the post-war ashes. Graves had abjured a bankrupt culture which he believed to be fundamentally flawed, weakened by its wholesale dependence upon reason and technology and its insensitivity to other dimensions of feeling.

Within the economy of his verse, however, the negational aspect of exile received less emphasis, displaced by an affirmation of the positive values of the remote pastoral retreat - including its forms of loss and suffering - which is henceforward regarded as the proper ground for the growth of a full humanity, and which reproaches the incomplete account of human nature offered by civilized existence. Exile is then interpreted as the ineluctable condition of modern man, with pastoral escape his true homecoming.

This posture accords with a most ancient body of poetic doctrine. A leading theoretician of the pastoral, Renato Poggioli, has argued that its "psychological root is a double longing after innocence and happiness, to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration but merely through a retreat."⁵⁴ The vocabulary of Graves' verse, and its growth towards myth, is deeply rooted in this aesthetic. With the translation to Majorca as its biographical expression, Graves' exile takes him to a realm where his inner conflict can be dramatised in a confrontation with nature, nature encountered in forms freed from the repressive shadows of civilization, preferred as a wild infinity rather than an orderly bounded vista. Here anxiety and guilt can be subsumed into the myth of pastoral love, "an erotic bliss made absolute by its own irresponsibility",⁵⁵ because, as Poggioli observes:

...the task of the pastoral imagination is to overcome the conflict between passion and remorse, to reconcile innocence and happiness, to exalt the pleasure principle at the expense of the

reality principle.⁵⁶

The tradition of the pastoral, Poggioli goes on, maps out the progress of the poetic career as one from pastoral to epic, most ably exemplified, ironically enough, in the achievements of Virgil and Milton. Pastoral is the form in which the poet moves temporarily to an oasis far removed from the curses of urban living - work, money, politics, law - to relocate himself in the primordial emotions of erotic love and natural piety. From this vantage he can explore his own solitude, meditate upon the tragic transience of human experience, and remonstrate against the shortcomings of the far-off city, where the organisation of civic living has severed man from the tissue of feelings and senses which should bind him to nature. Suitably replenished, and confirmed in his vocation, the poet returns triumphantly to the centre of power and pledges his art to the glory of the community by the composition of an epic celebrating its heroic exertions, its gods, and its martial prowess. To these spatial metaphors, Poggioli acknowledges, might be added temporal figurations, because

To restore at least ideally its own moral balance,
the pastoral turns back to the myth of the Golden
Age and claims that in prehistoric times there
existed a state of perfect equality and absolute
justice, which lasted as long as the goddess
Astraea graced the earth with her presence.⁵⁷

The pattern of Graves' literary career might be described as a post-romantic ironic variation on the archetype of the pastoral. Romantic versions of the pastoral stressed it as the context for what Frye terms "expanded consciousness", "pity and terror becoming modes of pleasure, usually the beautiful and the sublime respectively... where the poet balances the catharsis of his view of experience with the ecstasis of his view of a spiritual, invisible or imaginative

world."⁵⁸ The Romantic failure in epic found its spiritual compensation by transforming a wild, untamed landscape into its central metaphor for the monstrous and intractable awareness of the affective self. Graves partakes of the vision in an ironic reversal of the classical paradigm of the poetic career. Recoiling in pain and horror from a martial experience articulated in the biographical mode (Goodbye To All That), Graves flees the domain of the city and its gods of technology, and seeks a new context for his poetry in the renovated pastoral supplied by his Majorcan oasis. This is to be no temporary respite. The setting for the development of his creative talents is destined to remain the scene of his life's work, where an ancient mythology of love is revived in the figure of a barbaric Lunar Muse who animates the natural world and takes up all of the poet's offerings of love and suffering. The later mythology has, as we shall see, serious implications for the social and political order, but Graves gathers together only the radiant fragments of epic in the bricolage of motifs he calls The White Goddess, and never returns to the total embrace of his culture or class. Ultimately, what we have termed the 'magical' or 'shamanistic' account of human purpose requires no endorsements from official culture, and makes of the pastoral realm a sufficient and commensurate symbolism.

This particular version of the pastoral makes a clear separation between what Barthes once said was a view "that Nature...can be possessed, that it does not shy away or cover itself in shadow, but is in its entirety subjected to the toils of language", and the modern sense that nature is "a fragmented space, made of objects solitary and terrible, because the links between them are only potential."⁵⁹ Graves' pastoral, prior to the emergence of the Goddess from its symbolism, is subject to the sense of danger and inadequacy menacing subjectivity which David Kalstone believes to be modernity's typical modulation

of the pastoral voice.⁶⁰ It is "the active engagement of the singer or poet in a landscape",⁶¹ filling out his own self-consciousness: "modern pastoral draws its energies from exercises of the eye and ear, from explorations rather than companionable song."⁶²

In "Return",⁶³ Graves' active engagement with the opportunities of the pastoral retreat expresses the definitions of exile which seem to underpin much of his writing from this period. In this poem, the self encounters an alter-ego who, it seems, has usurped its claim to the "surer peace" which comes from the encounter with nature. Exile is described as "The seven years' curse" which "drove me forth from this kind land". Return to "this green place" means the end of exile in the "sterile ground" of the world beyond the pastoral oasis. Contrast between the two realms is conveyed in alternating images of drought and fertility, the "famine's itch and flames of thirst" contrasting starkly with the "brook from fields of gentle sun" which "Through the glade its water heaves." This particular version of the pastoral would rest confidently on the quiet bucolics of the countryside were it not for the presence of the "cold malicious brain" and "most uncharitable, cold heart" of the antagonistic alter-ego.

The emergence of this doppelganger figure was foreshadowed as early as the haunted creature who followed Christ in "In the Wilderness", or in the poet's own "wraith" who "before me stood" on "The Morning Before the Battle". But these were only vague prefigurations of the splintering of the poet's being which was to occur as a consequence of the contradictions of war and the inability to achieve a complete dissociation from the culture which had so grievously alienated him. The doppelganger is, in effect, an embodiment of that historic doubleness of myth we have discussed throughout this study, and which is itself analagous to the crisis of complicity with which Graves' stance

in relation to his own history was afflicted. Myth both belongs and does not belong to the discourse of high culture. The dissident soldier-poet has both rejected and failed to reject the traditions in which his culture has been mediated to him. The irresolution manifests itself psychically in the materialisation of a ghostly alter-ego who both is and is not the poet himself.

Later, Graves will consolidate the doppelganger by hedging him about with the motifs of the Dark Twin, the poet's other self, his eternal rival for the love of the Goddess, and further justify his presence in terms of a dual sacred kingship, unearthed from anthropological speculation. The beginnings of the process are evident here in the poet's reference to his having been "Sent scapegoat for your pride". He is the pharmakos, "innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes...guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence."⁶⁴ Frye's definition is helpful because poet and alter-ego inhabit interchangeable roles. The return of the poet to his true realm banishes the doppelganger to the sterile ground of impoverished reality, the "world of fools". There is always an aspect of the poet that is trapped within the narrow confines of the ordinary world, snared in the culture he appears to have fled. There is no final form of release.

Landscape assumes an individualising force in Graves' pastoral through the renewing agency of love, though the rendering of love into the poetry does not deliver the "erotic hedonism" of which Poggioli speaks,⁶⁵ because it remains perpetually overwrought by love's failures and breakdowns. In "Return" this erotic idealism infuses the 'pastoral of innocence',⁶⁶ in which the poet finds his "surer peace". But the general pattern of the poems of this phase of Graves' writing is

shadowed by the ever deepening gloom of what he labels in "Full Moon"⁶⁷ love's defeat":

The moon, attained to her full height,
 Stood beaming like the sun:
 She exorcized the ghostly wheat
 To mute assent in love's defeat,
 Whose tryst had now begun.

The ever-deepening cycle of the decline of desire unfolds, in this poem, within a landscape emptied of colour and individual character; an anonymous, monochrome landscape uniquely susceptible to the abulia which has overcome poet and lover. "Full Moon" offers no meditative analysis, no judgement. The regular metre, and the fluent inevitability with which the firmly-stressed rhymes succeed one another carries the eye along through the development of a complete drama-in-miniature governed by the sense of passive resignation in the face of inescapable failure. The "man and wife who nightly keep/Inconsequent debate in sleep" have endured a loss of volition which persuades them that they are nothing more than helpless pawns of a larger providence covertly undoing their relationship for reasons obscure to them. The carefully-patterned rhyme-scheme and the yielding syntax cooperate effortlessly with the restrictions of the stanza form to two couplets and a triplet, all of them end-stopped, and the effect is to recreate that feeling of "mute assent" in the reader; a paralysis before the blind outworkings of fate:

Your phantom wore the moon's cold mask,
 My phantom wore the same;
 Forgetful of the feverish task
 In hope of which they came.

The full horror of the lovers' inertia is expressed in the stagnation of the terrain, and in the distorted forms of nature which loom over them. "The fields lay sick beneath my tread", recalls

the poet, and "a grey distraction" rises between the lovers to figure their opacity to one another. They appear in devitalised forms: metaphorically as owlet and nightingale, then as phantoms, images, marble statues, and, finally, the lifeless shapes of "Two bergs of ice", descending through a scale of being from the bestial to the mineral as desire ebbs away.

What the poet perceives in this poem as the unavoidable demise of love undergoes an important advance in his mythical thought by the additional symbolic significance accorded the moon. The moon appears either literally or as simile or as metaphor in four out of the poem's five stanzas, achieving its most potent personification as "the tyrannous queen above/Sole mover of their fate." The vague, pervasive sense of guilt and menace which had permeated much of the early poetry, dimly ascribed to the deepest levels of consciousness, and vainly parried by the rhetoric of love or violence, is, in this poem, unambiguously attributed to the oppressive influence of a cruel lunar goddess, an inchoate form of Diana the Huntress, whose temporal cycles adumbrate the progress and defeat of love. The disclosure appears only briefly but it is enough to seal the identification of fate with the caprice of an archaic love goddess, whose presence is surely also felt in the final stanza's last, archetypal image of erotic betrayal:

The broad moon sailed between;
There swam the mermaids, tailed and finned,
And love went by upon the wind
As though it had not been.

Graves' handling of mythological and folklore motifs becomes more assured following this advance in his poetry. Progress is also reflected in the confidence with which he deploys the motifs to facilitate a more steady, reflective analysis of the various postures taken by love. The perplexed submission before love's vagaries yields

to a cool, detached, even rational, analysis of the self-deceptions and the accidents of circumstance which propel sexual relationships through the round from discovery to defeat.

The conscious artifice of the much-revised "Vanity"⁶⁸ is built up from a plethora of folklore images which ably supplement the pastoral's storehouse of emblems, adding to conventional metaphors such as "the pools of peace" and "the flowers of innocence" the rich possibilities of the Dragon, the wind-harp, the lightning-blasted tree and the toad. From these emblems, Graves strives to create a fable of love's struggle with the terrors of fate and individual selfhood which conspire to undermine the "certitude" which is love's final illusion. The tone is admonitory, submitting to the logic of the fable, which permits the poet to objectify his judgements:

Be assured the Dragon is not dead
But once more from the pools of peace
Shall rear his fabulous green head.

The special property of terza rima, or any chain-rhyme, is its intrinsic instability. Typography imposes an apparent unit of three lines, but 'terza' more properly should denote the triple occurrence of each rhyme rather than the spurious tercet - spurious because it does not exist in the ear. Each phonic sequence, beginning with the b-rhyme, carries forward the argument of the poem into the next tercet, perfecting itself in five lines, the fourth of which, by introducing the succeeding rhyme, opens the poem to the next idea. This allows Graves to string together several diverse images, including those of the pastoral oasis, the allegorical house and mythological beasts, without creating the impression of incongruity in the mind of the reader.

In fact, Graves' technique permits the addition of any number of images provided their place within the overall interpretative scheme

of the poem is made clear. The emblems are rendered readily transparent, by virtue of their commonplace associations or the generous explanations appended to them, in order to convey the poet's argument. The 'vanity' of the poem's title is really a reference to the conceit with which lovers customarily surround themselves in comforting but incomplete definitions of love, definitions which fail to take proper cognizance of the protean intractability of desire. The lovers' preference is for the comforting lie of immutability: "As now, so must it always be", sheltered in the "one house" of their mutual regard.

Such prophecies of joy awaken
The toad who dreams away the past
Under your hearth-stone, light-forsaken...

The Grendel-like toad of vanity exists in the foundations of the house, a region we know to be symbolic of the repressed awareness of the pre-rational psyche. Graves here extends the idea to include the unconscious forces thriving beneath the shared awareness of an erotic relationship, whose version of rational perception is the public ritual of domesticity in which the lovers assert the permanence of their bond. Such arrogant insensitivity to the mysterious workings of love's growth and decline invites the dragon who is the obverse side of vanity to reassert the destructive urges harboured by the experience of love, and assail conjugal "certitude" with the forces of chance and unreason:

Who knows that certitude at last
Must melt away in vanity-
No gate is fast, no door is fast-

This particular monster from the id challenges the tranquility of the pastoral by reviving the forms of elemental destruction which lurk beneath its surface and of which he himself is a part. In

so doing, he reminds us that, for Graves, nature is always also a psychological terrain. It is the "gardens of the mind" which "fall waste" and "fountains of the heart" which "run dry". It is the barely-restrained anxieties of individual selfhood which return to prey upon the restorative properties of love.

The flaws which lurk within the experience of love, and which the man and woman in "Vanity" ignored to their cost, are treated from a similar perspective, one which combines both sympathy and detachment, in the poem "Sick Love".⁶⁹ But a significant shift in emphasis in the outlook of the poem occurs in the identification of the monstrous and subversive terrors of the unconscious with the physical lust which threatens the purity of love, the "smiling innocent on the heavenly causeway" menaced by "The dumb blind beast, the paranoiac fury". The carpe diem mood of the opening lines is subordinate to an absorption in nature which sharply demystifies love by drawing the human into the vegetative cycles of growth and decay: "O Love, be fed with apples while you may,/And feel the sun and go in royal array." The moral realism which allies love with an untranscended nature leads inevitably to an encounter with the baser emotions of the merely natural man, and also to a sharp reminder of the ubiquity of death, for mortality shadows love most darkly in the physical embrace.

As Panofsky recalled for us, the Renaissance legend "Et in Arcadia Ego" hangs over every version of the pastoral, because the classical geography of Arcadia is located firmly within the pagan universe of death.⁷⁰ Pastoral verse began in the laments for the dead Adonis, carefully humanized in the elegies of Theocritus and Moschus. The celebration of love, licence and vitality may have repressed the awareness of mortality, erasing its presence from the legend itself, but, as Freud knew, the repressed always returns, perhaps, as in

several of Graves' poems, as fear of the sexual act. "Sex is fear", says one of the characters in But It Still Goes On.⁷¹ "Sick Love" strives to combat the combined "listening horror" of sex and death by an extension of the carpe diem theme to embrace a complete triumph of the will over time and the body:

Be warm, enjoy the season, lift your head,
Exquisite in the pulse of tainted blood,
That shivering glory not to be despised.

The warnings issued in "Vanity" yield to a series of high rhetorical imperatives, reflexes of the will's defiance of mortality, which create an affirmative mood which does not ignore the imperfections of love, but rather accepts that they are part of the human condition. Indeed, the "pulse...of blood" is "exquisite" precisely because it is "tainted" by the anxieties of love's fragility. The unconscious and capricious influences which threaten love are also responsible for much of its tragic and compelling dignity. For those who accept the logic, the uncertainty, of natural process, the "momentariness" of love is "a shining space", a 'spot of time' or 'epiphany' which shows forth the fullest spiritual possibilities of existence, and which divests death of its terror by locating it within the human seasons of decay and renewal.

Omens of the Goddess

Graves' pastoral, in which he at last began to find the resources to reintegrate his divided psyche, is a place not of the simplicities of bucolic life, but rather an environment in which vicissitude can be faced and understood. Healing can take place under the curative influence of love only when the full contradictoriness of all human remedies is openly acknowledged. Pastoral love is no mild and beneficent balm sent to minister to the ego's hurts. It is itself

tragically implicated in the incompleteness of human communication, the selfishness of desire and the animal urges which cling to man's somatic life. Self-understanding and improved interaction prove as elusive here as they did in the sterile ground of modernity.

But where the pastoral does triumph over modernity is in its vast array of traditions and motifs from which the poet can dramatise his conflicts, advancing at each stage towards a fuller affirmation of love's risks and possibilities. What might be described as the fateful combination of artifice, innocence and barbarism that is the framework of the pastoral proves to be a rich source of mythopoesis. To the poet whose life appears in all of its important events to aspire to the condition of myth, the setting affords a heterocosm of opportunity. Here is Joseph Campbell again, commenting upon the relationship between biography and myth:

A man, perhaps an author or persona or hero, experiences an event or series of events through which he symbolically dies, suffers deeply or at least recognizes the miseries of a dichotomous world. Fortunately he carries with him abilities which allow him to endure, to 'accomodate' his stricken condition. But his ultimate struggle, his vision, is to assert himself, to remake his world, perhaps to realize a mystical or religious rejuvenation, and not just to be 'reborn', but more significantly, to be 'transfigured'.⁷²

We would be hard-pressed to find a better summary of Graves' career! The retreat to the pastoral can, as Campbell also suggests, be structured as part of a monomythical progression. It can be made to represent the hero's withdrawal to find the knowledge or boon equipped with which he can return to his waste land home in order to restore it to life.⁷³ I have tried to show that, up to this point in his career, Graves is not concerned with the final stage of this progression because the modern world is, for him, no home to which he can return. Nevertheless, another observation of Campbell's serves as a useful

insight into Graves' uses of the pastoral: "Modern literature is devoted, in great measure, to a courageous, open-eyed observation of the sickeningly broken figurations that abound before us, around us, and within."⁷⁴ These broken figurations invade Graves' pastoral because its account of romantic love is deliberately left open to them. The ways in which Graves recasts the storehouse of mythological motifs allows him to further explore the baffling vagaries of love and desire.

One of the chief forms of death-in-life which undermines the spiritual value of love continues to be, in several of these poems, the problem of the body. In some of the poems (e.g. "Thief") physical being is itself lamented; in others (e.g. "The Furious Voyage") the body is punished for bringing low the noble aspirations of the spirit. The eponymous hero of "Ulysses"⁷⁵ is presented to the reader as the pitiable victim of his own lust, his traditional series of adventures allegorized as descriptions of his "lewd fancies":

To the much-tossed Ulysses, never done
With woman whether gowned as wife or whore,
Penelope and Circe seemed as one.

Impaled upon his own sensuality, Ulysses fails to individuate either the objects of his desire, or even himself. Overcome by his baser instincts, he can see women only in so far as they function to minister to his domestic or erotic needs, the union of which has been fractured: "She like a whore made his lewd fancies run,/And wifely she a hero to him bore." Lust confuses the roles of domestic piety and sexual satisfaction, the irony of their inversion mocking Ulysses' heroic stature: "Their counter-changings terrified his way."

G.S. Fraser penetrated this paradox most illuminatingly when he noticed that the "she" and "she" in the first stanza "reproduce in a neat inverted antithesis (it is Penelope, though she is a wife, who makes

lewd fancies run, and Circe, though she is a whore, who bears a hero to him) the effect of an Ovidian elegiac couplet."⁷⁶ Although Graves excoriates Ulysses' submission to lust, he pities the hero's predicament, which turns upon a terrible dialectic of revulsion and attraction. Ulysses' abasement before the power of his own fantasies is truly fearful, threatening to turn the heroic pattern of his odyssey into nothing more than a projection of the turmoils and failures of his sexual life, and reducing the opening and closing epic similes of the poem, "much-tossed" and "love-tossed", to mere satire. Before the inviting eroticism of "the Sirens' throng", Ulysses' struggle "bound fast/hand and foot helpless to the vessel's mast" is recast by Graves as a vain and contrived encounter with temptation, "daring their song", the only issue of which is self-loathing. Ulysses is a man who abhors his own lust but whose dilemma is that he cannot escape it. His fate resists elevation to the level of tragedy because there is no anagnorisis: Ulysses is aware from the outset of his self-deceptions: "He loathed the fraud, yet would not bed alone", content to see his sufferings decline to the bitterness of the self-recriminating voluptuary:

One, two and many: flesh had made him blind,
 Flesh had one pleasure only in the act,
 Flesh set one purpose only in the mind -
 Triumph of flesh and afterwards to find
 Still those same terrors wherewith flesh was racked.

The repetition of the word "flesh" recreates for the reader Ulysses' obsessions with the sexual act, which have reduced his many adventures to encounters with his own unassuaged lust and the derelict forms of desire it projects on to the external world. His remorse returns to devour him when he realises that the surface attributes of his "wiles" and "fame", renown of which has brought "Every king's daughter" to seek "him for her own", mask an inner loneliness and homelessness

which has bound him prisoner to his own most frightful urges. "All lands to him were Ithaca", concludes the poet, meaning also that all women are but multiple, saddeningly incomplete images of a lost Penelope in whom the apparent contradictions of love and desire were once reconciled.

Lust exists in these poems as a remembrance of the body's rebelliousness and as a cry from the most alienated and remote areas of man's consciousness. Graves clothes his analysis of the tormented psyche in the language of myth because, more than any other discourse, myth gives access to the nexus where reason and instinct collide, a region which, Graves would claim, properly lies outwith the purview of reason in the first place. The "lonely fears" of the "Heart" addressed in "Leda"⁷⁷ originate from the same seat of the emotions which is man's blessing and his curse. It is not that the ego should be mobilised to restrain the unruly forces of the id, Graves calls for a more radical kind of imaginative renovation, in which relations between the self and the unconscious, and between the self and nature, are raised to a cleansed level of perception where baser instincts can be purged away.

The heart, in "Leda", is at first reproached for the voyeurism with which it "lecherously mused upon/That horror with which Leda quaked." The iambic pentameter creates a pattern in the poem which modulates the expression of disgust and slows down subtly the explicit condemnation which informed "Ulysses". But the poet's perspective on the myth is a complex one. In the background is the tableau of the swan raping Leda, identical to Yeats' "Leda and the Swan"; in the foreground is the heart illicitly absorbed in the contemplation of this spectacle. But in the middle distance lies the registering perception of the poet, intently questioning the bond between heart and icon, an icon which is at once both the object of the heart's "lecherous" musings,

and the projection of its "lonely fears". Graves is careful to restate the linkage between that lust which reduces the focus of desire to an object, and the terror of individual selfhood which dreads equally the urges of its own unconscious and the reality of other selves. Fixed upon the image of Leda's subjection, the heart in the second stanza is upbraided for its active shaping participation in the violence, an involvement the obliquity of which exceeds the complicity of the mere spectator:

Then soon your mad religious smile
 Made taut the belly, arched the breast,
 And there beneath your god awhile
 You strained and gulped your beastliest.

The disordered perception conferred by lust leads to the subject's identification with the victim which is no real empathy at all because it is trapped by the fetishism which keeps the reality of other selves at a safe distance. The heart does not feel Leda's shame and horror, it strains and gulps in paroxysms which indicate its submission to the lust it has unleashed, a lust which has both created, and been created by, the mythic tableau. The causal sequence is impossible to unravel.

Readers will inevitably compare the poem with Yeats' version of the myth. Both writers seem to have been engaged initially by the violence of the scene, though for very different reasons:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.⁷⁸

Yeats' poem is much more densely textured, the criss-cross of assonance and half-rhyme and the rapidly-moving anapests carrying the helpless Leda through the poem, staggering, loosening, catching, dropping. For Yeats, the question is whether Leda grasped the significance

of the attack. The flows of desire are balanced in the gyre which brings Zeus down from passion to indifference, and simultaneously raises Leda from helpless fear to the ecstatic communion, "so caught up... by the brute blood of the air." The knowledge which Yeats dreamt Leda may have put on in her assault is read dismissively by Graves as the sordid reality of "bawdry murder and deceit" to which the heroic exertions of Troy and Mycenae might be reduced.

For Graves the question is whether we can disenthral the heart from its bondage to a dreadful dialectic of fascination and horror by exorcising the presence of lust, which sullies all that is holy in the heart's affections. In his closing address to what is a synecdoche of his own self, the poet upbraids the heart for "Perpetuating night because/The after-langours hang so sweet", for drawing a vicarious sado-masochistic satisfaction from the contemplation of Leda's suffering. Lust, according to the philosopher Roger Scruton, is a variant of the intentionality of desire which "has the human body as its object...

...its extreme version is rape, but it is always, in some measure, tantamount to rape, since it regards the other instrumentally, and seeks to compel him (sic) to accept what is imposed upon him.⁷⁹

What Scruton terms "'the paradox of lust'"⁸⁰ can be formulated simply:

The other, in becoming an instrument of my pleasure, becomes a thing. But the force of my passion arises only because I regard him as a person, who will respond to my violation of his freedom with hatred and pain. At the same time I fantasise that he consents to my deed, and that he responds with the same lustful impulse as myself. It is only on this supposition that I wanted him. Hence I both take away his personal nature in thought and return it to him in the form of fantasy. In some deep way I am at variance with myself, wishing him to be the person and thing together.⁸¹

Both Ulysses and the "Heart" in "Leda" fall victim to this double-bind, depersonalizing the female in order to reinscribe her with the characters of sexual fantasy.

It is ironic that the terminology of sexual psychology employs the language of the pastoral to define both male and female variants of sexual incontinence. 'Nymphomania' and 'satyriasis' do violence to the innocence of the pastoral, an innocence which resides more in the primitive etymology of "harmlessness" rather than the derived meanings of "guiltlessness" or "freedom from sin". Graves' version of the pastoral avoids artificial innocence by its fidelity to truth-telling and its direct and uncompromising observation of experience. In his poetry, the pastoral is the point of intersection for many kinds of poetic awareness, with landscape a dominant metaphor for the various positive and negative features of the emotional life. The exploration of those powerful feelings to which man is often involuntarily subject, most obviously love, is pursued by exploiting the symbolic possibilities of the pastoral oasis or by borrowing the resources of myth which can be re-read to yield an objective correlative for states of mind and interaction.

Graves is particularly adept, at this point in his work, at taking an image possessed of a vague penumbra of associative symbolism and contextualising it in a way which opens up new insights into the promises and anxieties of heterosexual love. "The Christmas Robin"⁸² exhibits many of these characteristic features: a landscape suddenly altered by contact with the poet's imagination; a disturbance in nature mirroring a disturbance in the poet's psychosexual development; a readjustment to the conventions of the pastoral in order to accommodate an abnormality of perception. "The Christmas Robin" subsumes many of these themes into the epiphany upon which it is concentrated, presaging some aspects of the nature mysticism which will be a hallmark

of the presence of the Goddess. There are strong echoes in it of Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush",⁸³ though where Hardy's bird is invested with an unsustainable "Hope, whereof he knew/And I was unaware", contrasting defiantly with the "fervourless" feeling that grips both poet and landscape, Graves' Robin is the omen of that blind caprice which inevitably undoes love.

The snows of February had buried Christmas
 Deep in the woods, where grew self-seeded
 The fir trees of a Christmas yet unknown
 Without a candle or a strand of tinsel.

The transactions between the human and the natural are evident in the human terminologies which intention inscribes upon the blank parchment of the snowfield: times, seasons, festivals, the detritus of Christmas. In the apparent lifelessness of winter, man's bond with a nature cooperating with his imaginative purposes invests the landscape with a rich potential. Nature's "self-seeded" cycles go on regardless of man's interest, but the presence of "we lovers" stamps them with a human meaning:

Nevertheless when, hand in hand, plodding
 Between the frozen ruts, we lovers paused
 And "Christmas trees!" cried suddenly together,
 Christmas was there again, as in December.

The poet enthrones an anthropic principle at the heart of nature. The lovers, far from being an alien presence in the forest, are the necessary point of human reference by which nature is named, or, to borrow the terms of Wallace Stevens, mastered, portioned, arranged and enchanted,⁸⁴ actions which recall that organizing power of language first alluded to in "Down" and "The Cool Web". Language permits the lovers to impose their own reality upon the natural world:

We velveted our love with fantasy
 Down a long vista-row of Christmas trees,

Whose coloured candles slowly guttered down
As grandchildren came trooping round our knees.

Imagination freely alters the scene available to the empirical senses, and a new visionary panorama subdues nature to the lovers' desires.

However, "fantasy" is a word loaded with danger as well as promise. We have seen before how Graves astutely deflates the large vanities of love. This particular epiphany involves the lovers in an imaginative exaltation which, for a privileged and fleeting moment, allows them seeming insight into the destiny of their relationship. The seasonal and human cycles are briefly telescoped by the lovers' ambition. The natural landscape is momentarily altered by the veil of wish-fulfilment as they imagine this episode recurring endlessly through the long years of their relationship. Using 'velvet' as a verb suggests the new stag-horns which sprout each winter, their hardness muffled by the velvet. "Fantasy" may have softened the hard realities of love for the pair, its extraordinary power bending nature and perception to the self-deceptions of desire.

This hubris is challenged most firmly by the robin, a seemingly trivial Christmas-card animal whose mythological associations Graves briefly revives in order to set his unspoken knowledge against the lovers' "fantasy":

But he knew better, did the Christmas robin -
The murderous robin with his breast aglow
And legs apart in a spade-handle perched:
He prophesied more snow, and worse than snow.

The robin has no language with which to counter the lovers' symbolic alterations to nature. But his presence and his song, intruding into the lovers' reverie, reassert the primacy of unselfconscious nature, figured in the snow which will erase all sign of the lovers having been there. His prophecy reproves their fantasy, pointing

to an unspecified future redolent of the menace which threatens the vanity of love. He represents nature's version of the reality principle, the inconstancy which ebbs and swirls around human design, and which in its own inarticulate way harbours knowledge of love's inevitable defeat.

The imagery of the final stanza will bear a still less compromising reading. Graves' hints at the sinister, mythological connotations of the robin in the line "The murderous robin with his breast aglow". The natural world is not simply being considered here as amoral, or as in some sense blindly aware of the lovers' vulnerability. It is expressly malevolent. The robin comes to symbolize, by his folkloristic associations, a positive malice lurking in the universe and in the natural realm of seasonal change and recurrence, working against the lovers and capable of undoing all their imaginative accomplishments. The knowledge of love's defeat is thereby shrouded in an ancient and altogether more perilous symbolism.

The robin's mythic radiance reaches out to the folktale rivalry of Robin and Wrennock, figures whom Graves in his later mythology will advert to as the spirits of the old and new years.⁸⁵ Read retroactively, we may explain the symbol in terms of the Robin, both bird and Greenwood divinity, who slays his rival for the love of the Goddess in the endlessly-recurring cycle of the waxing and waning year. His presence in the poem the mature mythology would justify because, for Graves, every authentic heterosexual relationship recapitulates the ritual slaughter of the beloved consort. Hence the "breast aglow" is bespattered with the victim's blood from the deadly combat in the Greenwood. This, ultimately, is the burden of the robin's knowledge and prophecy.

A poem like "The Christmas Robin", then, advances into new territory, where the shadow of "the tyrannous queen above" looms large. But

it also serves to stress the continuity of his work, utilizing imagery and arguments, and written from a particular moral standpoint, the origins of which may be traced to his earliest literary experiments.

We can indulge to excess retroactive readings of poems which precede the full flowering of the mythos. But there can be no doubt that the mythological and pastoral poems move inevitably towards a resolution of their inner tensions which can be read as the rudimentary form of a single narrative; a story of exile and return; a story of the rejection of reason and society in the name of the principle of erotic love whose renovating power and difficult victories over man's baser drives are documented faithfully in the dramatic encounters of life with life which are the substance of the poems. Ulysses' multiple images of his lost beloved are antecedents of the view which will regard women as avatars of the Great Goddess. The heart's dismayed misreading of the Leda tableau, refracted through its own "bawdry, murder and deceit" foreshadows the 'iconotropy' which is the central trope by which the presence of the Goddess is reinscribed in the ordered discourse of mythology. The knowing robin who stands athwart the spade-handle anticipates the 'fabulous beasts' who populate the 'historical grammar' of 'the single poetic theme' in Graves' mature writings. Indeed, by this stage of his career even the attempt to write love poetry outwith the context of the pastoral, where there are "no heights, no deeps, no birds of the air", in a realm free from the contradictions of desire, ends in the fear that the beloved can be found "nowhere in the wide world" ("The Terraced Valley").⁸⁶ It seems that the poetry requires these antithetical experiences in order to exist.

The landscape of love described fleetingly in a poem such as "Lovers in Winter"⁸⁷ can render up its moments of benediction as well as its periods of torment. Increasingly, these moments of pastoral quietude

or bliss correspond in the poetry to the consoling presence of the female, who is the source of a universal peace and acceptance won after struggle. Her personality and consolation spread over poet and landscape in the lyrically-extended simile of the poem "Like Snow".⁸⁸ "She then, like snow in a dark night,/Fell secretly". The interjection of "then" into the opening sentence suggests that the event depicted is a sequel to some earlier happening about which we can only guess. Graves risks a great deal here by diffusing the identity of the female through the poem, a gesture represented figuratively in the simile itself, of "snow in a dark night". Not only is the female depersonalised, she thins out to invisibility by falling in the darkness, and is revealed to the observer as a blankness, "dazzling the drowsy eye", which might be the radiance of infinite possibility - the blankness of the unwritten page - or the white light of non-being. To the rational eye observing the dawn landscape, whiteness appears as that which Robert Lowell termed "the nowhere... of IS, the whited monster",⁸⁹ in Graves' poem interpreted by those blind to its symbolic significance as the whiteness of absence, "So that some muttered 'Too much light',/And drew the curtains close".

To think mythically, however, is to free understanding from bondage to the carnal sense, triggering the spiritual perception which interprets the plenitude of meaning exhibited by the landscape. Whiteness as absence, whiteness as pure presence: the assessment of Graves' mature mythology will turn on this antithesis of the carnal and spiritual senses. To the poet, the snow which is the impression of the beloved's presence left upon the landscape is "warmer than fingers feared,/And to soil friendly", because it betokens the life-giving energy of love and of woman. Moreover, the perception awakened by love and integrated with its own magical awareness, looks through

and not with the eye (to borrow Blake's formula) and recognizes that the panorama is not a white emptiness. The poet can discern in the snow "the histories of the night/In yet unmelted tracks", traces of the remembered conflict which has preceded this calm benediction, hieroglyphs recording in mythical language the struggle to achieve this vision of the White Goddess.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, N.J.), pp. 35-42.
2. Otto Rank (ed. Philip Freund), The Myth of the Birth of the Hero (New York, 1959). Freud owed an enormous debt to Otto, who supplied him with copious examples from ethnology to support his theories.
3. Karl Abraham, Dreams and Myths: a study in race psychology (New York, 1913).
4. Sigmund Freud (trans. Joan Riviere), "The Poet and Day Dreaming", Collected Papers, Vol 4, (London, 1950), p. 182.
5. Sigmund Freud (ed. James Strachey), Totem and Taboo, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Vol XIII: Totem and Taboo and Other Works (London, 1964), p. 106.
The term "Family Romance", now so popular among literary critics (who rarely quote the source!), was coined by Freud in "The Family Romance of Neurotics", a section Freud wrote for Rank, op.cit. pp.69-82.
6. Nietzsche, op. cit. I am grateful to my brother, Paul Davis, a research graduate in the Department of Philosophy, University of Edinburgh, for his guidance in the interpretation of this work.
7. Ibid p. 3.
8. Ibid pp. 45-64.
9. I am indebted to Rev Frank Foxon for pointing out this passage to me. It belongs to Chapter xxiii of The Birth of Tragedy, and is Frank Foxon's own translation from the German. Golffing's rendering of the same sentence is: "The forces of imagination and of Apollonian dream are saved only by myth from indiscriminate rambling.", op. cit. p. 136. Nietzsche continues (in Golffing's translation): "Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities. What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?", op. cit. p. 137. It is clear that the polemic of The Birth of Tragedy is addressed to the spiritual deracination of modernity.
10. Christopher Nash, "Myth and Modern Literature", in Michael Bell (ed), The Context of English Literature: 1900-1930 (London, 1980), p. 182.
11. Goodbye To All That, pp. 235-36. The nature of Graves' combat fatigue is usefully probed by William David Thomas, "The Impact of World War I on the Early Poetry of Robert Graves", Malahat Review, no. 35 (July, 1975), 113-19.
12. On English Poetry, p. 85.
13. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", Selected Essays (London, 1953), p. 287.

14. On English Poetry, p. 26.
15. Poetic Unreason, Author's Note.
16. Ibid p. 24
17. Ibid p. 2.
18. Ibid pp. 117-18.
19. Ibid p. 101.
20. Robert Graves, "On the Poet's Birth", Whipperginny (London, 1921), p. 61; Collected Poems 1914-1926 (London, 1927), p. 111.
21. "Virgil the Sorcerer", Collected Poems 1914-1926, pp. 28-29.
22. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (eds), The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Romantic Poetry and Prose (London, 1973), p. 9.
23. Goodbye To All That, pp. 238-42, 260; Seymour-Smith, op. cit. pp. 74-79, 114-16; R.P. Graves, op. cit. p. 216. Graves' gradual alienation from Christianity began early on: see R.P Graves, op. cit. pp. 101-02.
24. Robert Graves, "But It Still Goes On", But It Still Goes On (London, 1930), p. 217.
25. John Doyle (pseud. Robert Graves), The Marmosite's Miscellany (London, 1925).
26. Goodbye To All That, pp. 235-40.
27. "The Haunted House", Collected Poems, p. 4.
28. Ibid p. 5.
29. Ibid p. 6.
30. Ibid p. 7.
31. Ibid p. 8.
32. Day, op. cit. p. 25.
33. "A Frosty Night", Collected Poems, p. 10.
34. Ibid p. 17.
35. D. Narayanswamy, "The Early Poetry of Robert Graves", Journal of the Karnatak University (Humanities), 18 (1974) 126.
36. Collected Poems, p. 19.
37. Robert Graves, "The Pier-Glass", The Pier Glass (London, 1921), pp. 11-12.
38. Collected Poems, p. 22.

39. Ibid p. 31.
40. Ibid p. 30.
41. Robert Graves, "The Cool Web", Ibid p. 37.
42. Alan Barker, "Epistemological Ambiguity in the Earlier Poetry of Robert Graves", AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association 59, May 1983, 74.
43. Collected Poems, p. 36.
44. "Dedicatory Epilogue to Laura Riding", Goodbye To All That, 1st ed. (London, 1929), p. 428.
45. Laura Riding and Robert Graves, Epilogue I (Deya, 1935), Preface.
46. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (London, 1977), p. 214.
47. Robert Graves, "To Walk On Hills", Collected Poems, p. 85.
48. "On Dwelling", Ibid p. 82.
49. "Flying Crooked", Ibid p. 65; "In No Direction", Ibid p. 41.
50. "Quayside", "Brother", Poems 1929 (London, 1929), pp. 40-41. The poem "Brother" which appears in Collected Poems, p. 65 bears no relation to the earlier poem of the same name; "The Cloak", Collected Poems, p. 95.
51. Collected Poems, p. 95.
52. Robert Graves, Majorca Observed (London, 1965), p. 11.
53. Goodbye To All That, Prologue.
54. Renato Poggioli, The Oaten Flute: essays on pastoral poetry and the pastoral ideal (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 1.
55. Ibid p. 14.
56. Ibid p. 14.
57. Ibid pp. 26-27.
58. Frye, op. cit. p. 301.
59. Roland Barthes (trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith), Writing Degree Zero (New York, 1956), pp. 49-50.
60. David Kalsione, "Conjuring With Nature: Some Twentieth-Century Readings of Pastoral", in Reuben A. Brower (ed), Twentieth-Century Literature in Retrospect (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 247-69.
61. Ibid p. 251.
62. Ibid p. 263.

63. Collected Poems, p. 43.
64. Frye, op. cit. p. 41.
65. Poggioli, op. cit. p. 49.
66. Ibid pp. 54-64.
67. Collected Poems, p. 46.
68. Ibid p. 47. The poem "Essay On Knowledge", Welchman's Hose (London, 1925), pp. 14-15, is a distant ancestor of "Vanity"; but the latter poem is so heavily revised as to bear little relation to its precursor. I therefore cannot agree with the assertion of Kirkham, op. cit. p. 94, that the poem remains "in essentials unchanged". The 'revised' version, "Vanity" appeared in, Robert Graves, Collected Poems 1965, (London, 1965), p. 41.
69. Collected Poems, p. 49.
70. Erwin Panofsky, Meaning and the Visual Arts (New York, 1955), chap vii.
71. But It Still Goes On, p. 294.
72. Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (London, 1975), pp. 10-11.
73. Ibid, passim.
74. Ibid p. 27.
75. Collected Poems, p. 56.
76. G.S. Fraser, "The Poetry of Robert Graves", Essays on Twentieth Century Poets (Leicester, 1977), p. 125. This remains, to my mind, the best single piece of criticism written on Robert Graves.
77. Collected Poems, p. 75.
78. W.B. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan", The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (London, 1950), p. 241.
79. Roger Scruton, Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation (London, 1986), p. 122.
80. Ibid p. 123.
81. Ibid p. 123.
82. Collected Poems, p. 63.
83. James Gibson (ed), Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems (London, 1976), p. 150.
84. Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West", The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York, 1981), p. 128.
85. Robert Graves, The White Goddess, pp. 186, 395-97.

See also: Robert Graves (ed), English and Scottish Ballads (London, 1957), pp. 149-50.

86. Collected Poems, p. 107.

87. Ibid p. 103.

88. Ibid p. 111.

89. "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket", in, Jonathan Raban (ed), Robert Lowell's Poems, A Selection (London, 1974), p. 40.

Chapter 4: The White Goddess and the Myth of the Triple Muse

Woman, Nature, Man

The convergence of poetry and myth in the writings of Robert Graves occurs as part of the organic development of certain key ideas in his thought. The pastoral realm whose lineaments were outlined in the previous chapter was not the product of sheer artifice. It emerged gradually in Graves' work under the pressure of experiences which had overwhelmed the mechanisms of psychic integration, mechanisms Graves tried diligently to understand in his early theories of creativity.

Chief among the experiences which alienated Graves from his time, his culture, and, in part, his own affective life, was war. It was war which first drove him to seek refuge among the alternate realities of the nursery, which had crowded around his infantile domestic world and against which the drama of the family romance had been played. These early excursions into pastoral did no more than provide Graves with the raw materials with which to dramatise his inner conflict. They failed to protect him from the terrors of neurasthenia, eventually persuading him that the symbolic and mythological resources with which the pastoral teemed should be used to make sense of, rather than to evade, his inner dilemmas.

In the immediate post-war period, the pastoral did afford Graves a literal and figurative alternative to the sterility of an industrial civilization he had come to despise, perhaps because, as Laurence Lerner observes, Arcadia is a way "of refusing history..."

If the ideal version of man's life is placed outside ordinary time, then we have a way of protecting ourselves against the suffering that human history offers...mankind has been able to tolerate suffering because it was given a meta-historical significance.¹

Suffering and violence are given a meta-historical significance in

Graves' pastoral primarily in the various landscape metaphors which express the troubled self's encounter with the interwoven texture of organic relationships that constitutes the natural world. This is seldom an easy encounter in Graves' verse, and though there are moments of profound consolation, in which the self is found more truly and more strange, they are won only after prolonged struggle with intransigent forms of nature that are themselves as much projections of the poet's mind.

The flight from history is transposed in the verse also as a flight from reason, and modernity's restrictive definition of technological man. The voice from But It Still Goes On which warns that the bottom has fallen out of everything would find its deepest fears accurately discerned in "The Fallen Tower of Siloam"² where the clairvoyance of the poet scans the defects which will bring civilization down in ruins:

...and what wide fissures ran
Up the west wall, how rotten the under-pinning
At the south-eastern angle. Satire
Had curled a gentle wind around it,
As if to buttress the worn masonry;
Yet we, waiting, had abstained from satire.

The eventual collapse of the tower, a kind of allegory of the upheavals of the Great War, may have caused the "shrieking/Of old men crushed under the fallen beams", but it is also welcomed for bringing down the corrupt edifice of an imprisoning social order: "And suddenly we were free -/Free to forget how grim it stood". The poet is left to ruminate upon the calculated duplicity of the city's poets who had felt it prudent "To be silent in Siloam, to foretell/No visible calamity." Their silence helped contribute to the ruin, but that ruin has also liberated them, as they knew it would, from the oppressive power of the city.

The anti-urban bias of Graves' poetry has, at this point, no room for civic or political responsibility. Sovereignty in the pastoral is handed over to the self, the moral imagination, and the circuit of its personal relationships:

...a higher morality than the current is entailed
on all poets whenever and wherever they live:
the morality of love...without love he cannot be
a poet in the final sense.³

The discovery of love within his vision of the pastoral did not instantly remove from Graves the conflicts which had played such a prominent part in the creation of his poetry. Fidelity to his vocation required an honest attempt to depict the pattern of love's involvement with the flaws and failings of the human condition, in particular the fears and solitude of individual selfhood. Winning through these limitations to a vision of achieved love entailed charting in the poems themselves the influence of love's action upon the human subjects. The early psychological theories not only permitted the creation of a paysage moralisé, they also served to remind Graves of love's dependence upon remote areas of consciousness beyond the sway of intention and outwith the chain of empirical causality. These distant influences, he came to believe, were responsible for love's moments of triumph and torment, and set in motion patterns of interaction over which lovers exercised only partial control. Gradually, the various elements of the argument implied by these discoveries coalesced in Graves' poetry to emerge as the dim outline of an implacable Lunar deity, focus of the caprice which governs love. Fate, frustration and failure came to be hypostatized in her inchoate form.

Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the lenitive properties of love as it is conceived in Graves' pastoral bower. The frightened

figure in "The Haunted House", driven by "the clouded tales of wrong/And terror" finds later that, under love's blessing, "...the ghosts...Cannot disturb our ordered ease/Except as summer dust tickles the nose to sneeze." Fully realised, the experience of love drives away the horrors of guilt and neurasthenia so that "No new ghosts can appear". "Their poor cause" is carried off upon "the weathers of the past", liberating the poet from his own deepest anxieties:

We are restored to simple days, are free
From cramps of dark necessity.
And one another recognize
By an immediate love that signals at our eyes.⁴

Frequently, in Graves' mature love poetry, love is seen to disarm the past of its capacity to tyrannize the present. This involves the poet in a sincere and direct engagement with his own past, an intervention in the record of his key personal experiences in order to reinterpret them according to the principles of, what is termed in one poem, "A Love Story".⁵

The story, as becomes increasingly prevalent in Graves' poetry, takes place within a landscape predisposed to certain emotional states. As spring signals love's restorative, vitalising powers, so a panorama punctuated by a "furious" "full moon", "a winter sky ragged with red", lined with "hedges high in snow", and across which pass "owls raving", suggests emotional turbulence to the poet whose faculties are sensitized to the presence of love. Interpreting the disturbances as "Solemnities not easy to withstand", the poet has reached the point where nature is acknowledged as a sacrament of love's presence, landscape and seasons read as signs of the cyclic movement of love's fortunes. Winter is equated with upheavals of feeling before which the poet now stands in silence, chastened by his memories of the past.

"In boyhood", he had "fetched the moon home,/With owls and snow, to nurse in my head", daring to introject the landscape, asserting that poetic power which turns nature into metaphor, perception into a text upon which the poet can write his own meanings, consoling himself "throughout the trials of a new Spring" with his ability to annexe aspects of nature for the purpose of dramatising his own conflicts. There is a curious tension here, and throughout the poem, between the esemplastic power of the poet's imagination and the density of nature resistant to his shaping purposes. Beneath the pressure of the child's creative powers, the landscape bends to his will, reluctantly allowing him to internalise the features out of which he tries to enhance his self-understanding. But the boy-poet is trapped by his own ability to make metaphors. The conflict for which he has appropriated the clusters of natural imagery, an absence of desire he describes as "Famine unassuaged", is itself represented in a seasonal metaphor: "the trials of a new Spring."

In recognizing the extent to which the boy-poet's perception is structured by the involvement of his senses with nature, we can see that the whole love story itself unfolds as a seasonal cycle. The imagery of each stanza carries us from winter through spring and autumn to return again to winter in the final verse. Similarly, each stanza is governed by a phase of the moon which correspond to phases of the poet's experience of love. The resurgence of love is closely identified with the warmth and vitality of summer:

...snow melted
Hedges sprouted, the moon tenderly shone,
The owls trilled with tongues of nightingale.

The extent to which the registering consciousness of the poet and the texture of nature interpenetrate is revealed in his statement "Her image was my ensign", a curiously self-reflecting assertion

which stresses the poet-lover's dependence upon the imagery he has derived from observation of the natural world. The poem confirms that there is no poetic consciousness anterior to the imagery. The poet does not 'use' the imagery, the imagery creates his sense of identity within the narrative, within the love-story that unfolds at the meeting point of self and nature.

The recollection called up from the depths of the poet's childhood memories is one of foolish misunderstanding. The painfulness and difficulty of establishing love are held in check by the austere image of "a lodgement/of love" being built "on the chill ramparts". "Lodgement" suggests beautifully the precariousness of a relationship seemingly surrounded by hostile forces. But it also echoes the medieval romance notion of a 'booth' in which lovers celebrate their private fulfilment. Taken together there is a strong sense of vanity and self-congratulation surrounding the poet's ability to assert his love in a hostile environment. This is underlined in the error which leads him to interpret the cyclic return of summer as sign of the absolute victory of love, which receives its corresponding accolade in nature.

Graves is at pains to dethrone the pride of the poet-lover who believes that both love and nature may be made subordinate purely to his will. Wisdom comes in the same way as it came to earlier versions of the self-possessed ego in Graves' verse, with the recognition that the signs in nature which appear to confirm the absolute and unambiguous triumph of love "were all lies, though they matched the time". The return of autumn, when "her image" which had been his talisman "warped in the weather", adumbrates the inevitable decline of love as the cycles of decay take over. The hard lesson the poet must learn is that love is subject to the vicissitudes of time and transience that no effort of the will can overcome.

Throughout the poem, the body of fate working covertly to undo the poet's illusions is closely coordinated with an image of woman reposing in the natural world. In the final, wintery stanza, the chastened poet personifies her as "Queen Famine". She represents, once again, the uncontrollable forces which animate the experience of love. The poet has learned that neither nature nor love, which she so effectively symbolizes, will yield to acts of will which seek to appropriate the symbolism or fashion love to preconceptions which arrest its development in the deep centres of human response. In humble resignation, the poet "recomposed the former scene,/Let the snow lie, watched the moon rise, suffered the owls", sublimating his suffering in an act of tragic submission to the female and her attendant symbols which "Paid homage to them of unevent".

A slight shift of emphasis in these poems directs attention repeatedly to deficiencies in the male ego when dealing with the opportunities and challenges of love. Residual self-will and ratiocinative lapses distort the male's perception of the other, so that in "To Sleep"⁶ the self-accusing "mind's eye" of the poet admits that "Loving in part, I did not see you whole". The commerce between the mind and the object of its desire is impeded by the "flesh-enraged" "fever-fit" of unsublimated sexuality which prevents "A whole you" from taking shape in the writer's consciousness, a disordered state comparable to the unease of insomnia. The texture of the poem effectively communicates the state which Blake once described as "unorganized desire",⁷ the interdependence of subject and object conveyed in the echoing phrases "you whole" and "whole you".

The predatory designs of the male will succeed only in reducing the woman to a series of uncoordinated fragments fetishistically enlarged into discrete objects hovering upon the edge of perception: "Of you sometimes a hand, a brooch, a shoe/Wavered beside me, unarticul-

ated-". By this process of synecdoche she is effectively depersonalized, made amenable to the male's possessive urges. "Unarticulated" is harshly plurisignative, catching the figurative dismemberment of the woman by the male's "vexed" longings, while, in the same sentence, linking the process of fragmentation to "the words I chose for your voice to speak", which "Echoed my own voice". The 'voicing' by the poet is really a kind of ventriloquism which violates the intentional integrity of the woman by robbing her of her own separate existence and diffusing her identity through the syntax of the poem. Her dispossession is heard in the 'echo' of the poet's "own voice" which obsessively subordinates her to the male will.

The recovery of love in the third and fourth stanzas, signalled by the repeated phrase "Now that I love you...", brings with it penitential self-knowledge which issues in the recognition that the fragments of perception were nothing other than "scattered elements of will". The apparent disintegration of the object of desire was, in reality, the break-up of the poet's own capacity to "see you whole", invaded by the bestial urges which periodically erupt from the corrupt male will, the "jealous dreams" which

...circle above the beds like bats,
Or as dawn-birds flew blindly at the panes
In curiosity rattling out their brains-

The advent of love once more restrains the destructive tendencies of the male ego, according the woman fullness of being which allows her to "be and say, as not before". "The mind clears and the heart true-mirrors" her in a moment of anaclysis in which she soothes the "self-bruising" sensibility of the poet-lover with the balm of sleep, his impulse to possess effectively sublimated.

Natural imagery appears in Graves' verse to convey the full range of the mind's possibilities, from disordered states associated with

the malignant hypertrophy of the ego, to the calm benediction which is concomitant upon the poet's submission to the outworkings of fate and the innate dignity of woman. As we have seen, in several important poems the full burden of fate merges with the presence of woman who is, in her turn, magnified into a pandemic feminine principle informing nature and human awareness with her awesome influence. "To Sleep" firmly anchors the poet's recognition of this state of affairs to a realistic account of woman's moral superiority. The "dawn birds" flying blindly "at the panes" are the natural representations of the poet's disordered passions, just as the trilling owls and nightingales from the bestiary of "A Love Story" betoken the ecstasy momentarily experienced in love. The point is that in the poetry, and in the pattern of love which it is seen to dramatise, the distinct otherness of nature is overcome. Nature is invested with an intentional quality which closes the gap between subject and object by reading nature symptomatically as a text in which are written the characters of love. It is this humanization of nature which, at its brightest, allies the work of Graves' imagination to the magical rites of the shaman, transforming the inert matter of a wholly objectified and insensate nature into radiant signs the significance of which is immediately available to human understanding. This is a metaphor for the act of writing itself. For it is in the poems that nature is most fully enlivened and lent a purpose focused on the human subject. Every tree, stone, animal, prospect is surrounded by an aura which describes presence, and which speaks out to those able to decipher its meaning.

Graves expounds one particular interpretation of the dialogue between the self and a fully humanized natural landscape in "Language of the Seasons".⁸ The semantics of the pastoral dominate his understanding allowing him to compare rural and urban, the anomie of the conditions

which exist in the city with the organic interplay of human and non-human elements which prevails in the country, the plenitude of the past with the emptiness of the present, and the contrasting forms of consciousness to which each side of the dialectic gives rise.

Something of the ambiguity of exile, however, to which we have alluded before, is shown in the rhetoric of the opening assertions:

Living among orchards, we are ruled
By the four seasons necessarily:
This from unseasonable frosts we learn
Or from usurping suns and haggard flowers-
Legitimist our disapproval.

The language of the seasons expresses itself in an unashamedly political diction: "ruled", "usurping", "legitimist" all imply a stable and secure kingdom whose origins may be divine but whose instruments are the familiar members of the political order the poet has left behind in the city. There is a complex interplay of antitheses at work in the opening verse which highlights the instability still lurking in Graves' pastoral. Rule and necessity suggest the submission to the seasonal cycle which is the beginning of the reprobate self's redemption through the mysteries of nature. But the presence of that cycle is registered upon the poet's awareness solely in the form of negative experiences such as "unseasonable frosts" or "haggard flowers" which bring not comfort but distress, yet which have to be affirmed as part of the necessary life of the pastoral. The poet goes so far as to reject the emblem by which the life-giving properties of the pastoral are normally represented, speaking of the "usurping suns" which, by implication, have no place among the orchards in which he wanders. The "disapproval" he displays towards the sun and the day follows from the dedication shown to Queen Famine and her Lunar emblems, and boldly anticipates the prophetic denunciation of Apollo the Sun-god, prime antagonist of the White Goddess, to

come in the mature mythology. Graves' account of the pastoral is essentially magical, a turning inwards to the realm of the night and the moon at the expense of the sun and the day. The belief that man's soul is found more fully in the night, that he is a child of darkness, represents the most complete form of the rejection of reality and reality's positivist reading of human nature.

"Language of the Seasons" is firmly biased to that realm of primary response first revealed in "Rocky Acres", and focused most clearly in the antithesis between "Weather" and the rule of the "seasons": "Weather we knew, not seasons, in the city". The vocabulary of civilized man is a falling away from the primordial bond with nature which the poet has rediscovered by his retreat to the pastoral. The "seasonless" city is the place where man's true nature is disfigured. Its language, and its outlook, force a separation of the affective and rational selves, clothing the most vital human experiences in a language alien to their true sense. In the city, "love" is "Framed...in later terminologies" which tear it from its proper autochthonous setting "among orchards", describing it in terms out of phase with its true import.

The claim that language itself is purged of its involvement in a corrupt state of affairs through renewed contact with the creative energies of nature is lent added significance when the language of the seasons, whether it be human communication or the referential signs of a natural environment attuned to human aspiration, is seen to be a language of love. The city's "later terminologies" are as distant from this love as was the archaic "stronghold" of "Rocky Acres" where "Seldom..." was "...heard any voice". It is found only where man, woman and nature meet in a synergy of shared aims.

To move to the periphery of experience becomes equivalent in the poem to moving to the margins of historical time, a shift predicted

in Poggioli's astute recognition that "All aristocratic dreams tend to look back and to long after restorations history will not admit".⁹ The shortcomings in the city's emotional spontaneity stem from its "later terminologies", a telling phrase in this context which suggests that the profile of Graves' verse is beginning to emerge as a romantic primitivism yearning after earlier, prehistoric kinds of interaction and community. If mankind is in accord with itself and nature outside the boundary of the city, then it was surely altogether more healthy before any kind of urban civilization existed. The consequence for this kind of reasoning is to turn poetry, as I have suggested, into shamanism - and this is exactly what Graves does. He carries his work into a sphere where religion and art coalesce and collapse into forms of atavism and primitive consciousness. Caught up in the rhythms of nature, the poet's only response to love is to "report how weight of snow,/Or weight of fruit, tears branches from the tree". Quiet submission to the endlessly-repeating cycles of nature affirms the ripe fertility of love, imaged by the fall of the fruit-laden branch, and its stark decline before the blasts of winter, signalled by a passing reference to "snow", the gleaming metonym of the White Goddess. Behind that vivid sense of tearing branches lies the dream of some return of the repressed, in which frustrated instincts turn back upon themselves in an orgy of self-chastisement, with the poet in some way its avatar. In short, the "Language of the Seasons" has transformed poetry into myth.

The shamanistic voice is heard again in "Mid-Winter Waking"¹⁰ where artistic creativity and fulfilment in love are explicitly connected. The renewal of poetic powers occurs at the winter solstice, equating the poet with the divine child whose nativity is celebrated at that juncture, and with the return of light and life to the dormant earth in whose "long hibernation" the poet shares. Soon all these elements

will be resolved in the synthesis of Graves' higher mythology. His recognition of the deep affinities uniting them confers upon the reborn poet a hieratic status "Guarded by timeless principalities". The self's enslavement to linear time is also abolished by the willing submergence of the ego in the cyclic round of the seasons and love's ever-repeated pattern of growth and decay, a 'participation mystique' through which the poet overcomes his fear of "of the worm of death".

A number of Graves' poems deal with the border between sleep and waking (e.g. "Like Snow", "To Sleep"), a hypnagogic state which seems to induce the kind of heightened consciousness in which the poet's susceptibility to natural imagery is momentarily increased. The interchange between the mind and nature intensifies, once again obscuring the line between subject and object. As perception teems with the traffic of images, it becomes impossible to tell which belong to nature nourishing the poet's needs and which are the outpourings of the newly quickened imagination: "O gracious, lofty, shone against from under,/Back-of-the-mind-far clouds like towers". Nature is apostrophized in a flexing of the imagination which counteracts the immobility of the season in which the poet has awakened to the rediscovery of his gifts. Nature yields to the shaping spirit of his creativity, sending "sudden warm airs that blow/Before the expected season of new blossom" in a manner which seems strangely opposite to the resistance it had shown to the poet's will in "A Love Story". The explanation for this new cooperation of mind and nature lies in the poet's attitude to the cosmic forces which surround him, and in his ego-denying openness to love. No longer does he struggle ruthlessly to subordinate the landscape to the operations of his will. The "clouds" and "airs" are invited to "Be witness" to the resurgence of poetic power. The warmth of new life comes unbidden to the poet because he has not tried to extort it from nature. Blessings

in the poem come "suddenly", like the "sudden warm airs.../Before the expected season" radiating an aura of discovery that is preserved in the syntax of the poem:

Be witness that on waking, this mid-winter,
I found her hand in mine laid closely
Who shall watch out the spring with me.
We stared in silence all around us
But found no winter anywhere to see

Instead of striving to confine nature to the boundaries of his own will, the poet now leaves himself open to the resources with which nature can supply poetic power. Delayed until the last stanza, there comes recognition that the source of this new disposition is the beloved. "Her hand" is "found" "in mine laid closely" rather than seized by the fever-fits of the will. This 'finding' is the 'finding of love', the obverse of the obsessive and haunted quester who had carried the terrors of his itinerant selfhood across the hills and valleys of Graves' pastoral. Woman, now, is the centre, through whom are refracted all the insights of the pastoral realm, and under whose benign influence the poet in "Mid-Winter Waking" "found no winter anywhere to see". Woman, nature and man achieve an unparalleled degree of mutual sympathy, united at the deepest levels of consciousness, under the aegis of love.

The burden of Graves' achievement as a writer rests on the scores of lyrics composed throughout his career which make him one of the twentieth-century's finest poets of heterosexual love. The verse of the nineteen-thirties- and forties matured into a celebration of arcadian love, expressed in tight lyrical forms, and unafraid to confront the difficulties, disappointments, shocks and betrayals inherent in the experience of love. Arcadia proved itself to be as complex and subtle a place as post-war England, and the simplicities of the passionate life did not reduce the problems of desire and commun-

ication to any significant degree. But the comforts of his pastoral landscape did bring Graves healing and a clarity of perception which testified to the reintegration of his fragmented psyche.

Controversy continues to surround the part played by Laura Riding in shaping Graves' aesthetic.¹¹ Though Riding definitely assisted Graves in finding the confidence to express his vision, there is no doubt that the central tenets of what he would subsequently call "the single poetic theme" evolved naturally from the preoccupations of his earliest writings and the impact of certain key experiences, principally war and exile, upon his ideas. Gradually, Graves began to set the values of poetic love against the claims of reason and the intellectual prejudice of Western man, seeking to rebuke technological hubris, philosophical absolutism and the scientific materialism to which he attributed the ills of the modern age. The banalistic, technocratic world of the West was, he insisted, heading for a catastrophe prefigured in the horrors of 1914-18.

Graves' opposition to what we might term the Cartesian account of man's relation to the self and everything external to it was not initiated simply by the ritual strategy intrinsic to the committed arcadian. A new and vital element had flourished in his thinking in response to the benefits he had derived from unravelling some of the riddles of erotic love. Partly in reaction to the various masculine worlds which had inflicted so much suffering on him, and partly as a genuine reappraisal of the history which, Riding claimed, had been abolished by the war, Graves began to be persuaded that woman was the personification of all the actively life-enhancing forces from which man in his intellectual pride had severed himself. As early as 1938, ten years before the publication of The White Goddess, Graves isolated war, class inequality and the suppression of women as the major causes of the world's problems:

The esprit de corps necessary for winning wars is difficult to cultivate among women, who tend to put the claims of their immediate friends and relations before those of any society in which they happen to be enrolled and to regard the individual as more important than the mass, and have an instinctive contempt for the law.¹²

We have seen how in "Like Snow" and "A Love Story" the idea of nature as the matrix for the restorative energies of erotic love becomes inextricably bound up with the plenitude of Woman as the presiding genius of love, chastising the faults of the ego, harmonizing desire with the deepest layers of the id, and reanimating the sources of poetic power. Frequently, these influences are felt most keenly in the hypnagogic state of heightened consciousness, when the barriers of reason are at their weakest, that precedes or follows sleep. This is the state to which the beloved addresses herself in the beautiful lyric "She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep":

She tells her love while half asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low:
As Earth stirs in her winter sleep
And puts out grass and flowers
Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow.¹³

Something of the same atmosphere of benediction clings to this poem as was evident in "Like Snow" and "To Sleep", poems which also treat of the peculiar access of grace afforded by the hypnagogic state. Graves was always fascinated by the borders of vision; those areas at the edge of consciousness or culture where conventional forms of awareness and traditional sources of inspiration shade off into barely-charted regions of thought and feeling. It seems to be at these critical junctures, synapses across which pass a charge from the unconscious to the conscious, from the heterodox to the commonplace, that the vitalising influence of the female is most

readily transmitted to the male, perhaps because his inveterate resistance to the irrational is then at its weakest.

"She Tells Her Love" is given a still more illuminating context by referring to its original setting. It was originally part of the argonaut novel upon which Graves was working when, he claims, the revelation of the White Goddess came upon him. There the poet Orpheus sings the lyric for Little Ancaeus as the Argo sails through a night sea. The thoughts that it stirs in his mind shed light upon the relationship of which it is a relic:

Ancaeus knew the name of the woman in the song:
it was Eurydice, the lovely wife of Orpheus, who
had accidentally trodden upon a serpent and been
stung by it. Not all the glorious music that
poured from his Hyperborean lyre could save her;
and in anguish he had cast the dust of Greece
from his sandals and journeyed to Egypt. But,
returning as suddenly as he went, he had lived
ever since in self-imposed exile among the
savage Ciconians and was their law-giver, arbiter,
and beloved friend.¹⁴

This Orpheus is a fascinating character, and one who will crop up again and again in Graves' middle and later writings. It is worthwhile to court, for a moment, the perils of the biographical fallacy to offer some insights which will be taken up in a later chapter.

"Hyperborean" was frequently regarded in antiquity, and is so regarded by Graves in The White Goddess, as an epithet of the ancient Britons.¹⁵ This Orpheus, then, composes his song on a British instrument. We need only add the circumstantial details that he lives "in self-imposed exile" and, indeed, that he "journeyed to Egypt...returning as suddenly as he went" to complete the equation of Orpheus with Graves himself. The roles of "law-giver" and "arbiter" belong, as we shall see, to Graves' later critical writings.

This identification is not as perverse as it might at first sound. Nor is it offered gratuitously. It is part of the process of

assimilating biography to myth that Graves began after his historic wounding in France, a process which did not require Laura Riding's presence to carry on throughout the poet's life. "She Tells Her Love" is only the first of many poems - though most of the others are late works - in which Graves speaks in the persona of Orpheus, the magical singer whose words could move nature to a state of rapture, where stones danced and animals gathered to listen to his voice. Orpheus is Graves' fullest realisation of the poet-victim figure who submits to the whims of the Goddess, though this, too, is a complex of ideas which only becomes fully active after the high point of the mythology has passed.

In "She Tells Her Love", we have Graves' favourite constellation of romantic images: sleep, darkness, winter, snow. The female communicates her love most effectively at that hypnotic dream-time that is neither waking nor sleeping, "In the dark hours" when consciousness is most alert to the language of love. She speaks in "half-words whispered low", utterance which itself hovers between language and silence, or between rationally ordered discourse and that made of "too much joy or too much fear" from which it is the purpose of the cool web of language to protect us. Around her thus unmediated presence the Earth repeats that winter transformation that occurred in "Mid-Winter Waking", the poet privileged to experience a momentary resurgence of nature's deep creative powers in the midst of winter lifelessness. The "half-sleep" of the poet attunes him to the "winter sleep" of the earth which "stirs" as he stirs at the prompting of the female.

The veil of falling snow, which had been half-visible in the earth's "winter sleep" and suggested by the frozen earth putting out its "grass and flowers", extends across the whole landscape of the poem in the closing two lines. This is the whiteness of total possibility,

the inviting blankness of the unwritten page. It is also the universal and comprehensive omnipresence of the Goddess in a form which here, as elsewhere, brings the sleep which is release from consciousness, which is death; a pervasive influence of lyrical dissolution which covers and thereby seems to reconcile the contradictions of waking life by abolishing difference. "She Tells Her Love" is abstention from activity. It blankets differences of time and place. It blurs thought; it blurs differential memories and differential human relationships, as white contains and blurs all colours. It arrests movement and discursive thought, and it sinks towards sleep.

We are never told what it is that the Eurydice figure "tells her love.../With half-words whispered low", and, indeed, the verb may simply be glossed as 'speaks of' rather than 'informs'. This is the kind of ambiguity which is submerged by the veil of compensatory beauty and homogeneity spread by the snow, the motion of which is imitated by the 'falling' rhythm of the last two lines, a metrical shift itself achieved by the addition in the final line of the adjective "falling" to the phrase "Despite the snow". The contraction of feeling at the end of the poem is thus achieved by a final image which powerfully combines motion and stillness, the enveloping cover of snow burying the contradictions of life in the aesthetic arrest of art, which is cognate with the poet's submission to the benign sovereignty of the White Goddess. "'I sigh for rest'", says Orpheus in the same passage from The Golden Fleece, "'to be taken at last into her benign keeping'".¹⁶

The yearning for rest beyond the vicissitudes of desire is a notable, if understated, theme in Graves' love lyrics. Rest is earned by the willing and repeated submission to the torments of love, an attitude similar to that held by the initiates to the mysteries, who, as we have seen, underwent ritual dismemberment in the Orphic and Pythagorean

cults in imitation of the butchered god, Dionysus. The purpose of these ritual sufferings, translated to the plane of poetic love, is to purge the ego of its pride and selfishness, vices which stand in the way of the soul's salvation and do violence to the opportunities offered by love. The male's contumacy and inveterate allegiance to the intellect are frequently castigated by Graves as obstacles to the full realisation of love's blessings.

Finding in the beloved a source of sustenance that brings peace and healing is one thing, but extending the sentiment to locate in woman the repository of all value and meaning for the individual and for human history demanded an ongoing interrogation of relations between the sexes. Graves began by subjecting the pretensions of the male intellect to the deepest scrutiny so as to expose the operations of power and authority through which men sought to disinherit the female of her innate superiority and thereby repress altogether the affective life of the race.

In the poetic creed he formulated in the 1940s, Graves goes still further, acknowledging woman as the Centre, embracing both the individual woman to whom the poet is dedicated, his personal Muse, and a larger, more pervasive concept of the Eternal Feminine who vouchsafes the meaning of existence from the womb to the tomb, and in whom are constellated the rewards of erotic love and the mysteries of death and rebirth. The male ego Graves reviles as the seat of reason and self-sufficiency working forever to enthrone will and the patriarchal principle as the highest human faculties, and striving to obscure the centrality of the female. It is to its delusions of absolutism that he attributes the overreaching ambitions of a rootless civilization corrupted by its own technological inventions and practising on nature the same depredations as it inflicts on its most creative members.

The ironic contrast of the two types of consciousness is brought out most heavily in the poem "Theseus and Ariadne".¹⁷ The self-deceived Theseus, convinced that the Ariadne he abandoned on Naxos could not have survived without his sustaining presence, indulges his lugubrious nostalgia with contrived remorse:

High on his figured couch beyond the waves
He dreams, in dream recalling her set walk
Down paths of oyster-shell bordered with flowers,
Across the shadowy turf below the vines.
He sighs: 'Deep sunk in my erroneous past
She haunts the ruins and the ravaged lawns'.

The altered state of dream-consciousness is here not used to draw upon the intuitions of woman, but rather as the medium for wish-fantasies of the will which manipulate the realities of the past. The limitations of his disabled outlook are engraved in the very structure of Theseus' fantasy. The dreaming indicated in the second line is properly drowsing-dreaming, what has been called here, and in other studies of the state, the hypnagogic still-image dreaming of half-sleep, as opposed to the rapid-eye-movement action dreams of deep sleep.¹⁸

What we have here, in fact is a myth of lonely male survival independent of the female. Theseus is "high" above and "beyond" the memories he recalls, elevated by his masculine vanity to a plane of separation and self-validation untouched by the truth of past events. He dreams "down", "across", "below" to the "deep sunk" episodes from his "past", graphically preserving his distance and the ego-inviolability it guarantees, deliberately placing the female in a position of remote subordination that is really the depths of the grave, of death, where she expires finally as a phantom who "haunts the ruins" of his gratuitous fantasies.

Theseus' nostalgia is a form of violence towards women born of a

grudge against them, and couched in a sentimentalism that presents itself as maudlin and morbid, because the fascination in such sentimentalism is not only with dying and disappearance out of the world, but equally with surviving beyond the disappearance of others. He is incapable of imagining Ariadne outside their shared past or his self-serving valuation of it, and his delight in "ruins and ravaged lawns" is a projection of the aggression which would reduce Ariadne to a ghost, a function of memory only, of a past that was never a present, with no personal identity of her own.

The assertion of a present reality in the second stanza makes plain that Theseus did try to ravage the lawns "when/Dread of his hate was thunder in the air", when a tormented nature "agonized" beneath his will "And flowers glared up at her with frantic eyes". But the poem now also affirms an independence of being resistant to his will. Ariadne's "surer foot", no longer cowed by his presence, mocks Theseus' fantasy of "her set walk"; and far from possessing only the illusory status of a haunting memory, she "calls", as an embodiment of natural life, "a living blessing down". Free from the fear he mistook for devotion, she is revealed as the focus of all the life-giving forces which converge on, and derive from, the female.

"She Tells Her Love" and "Theseus and Ariadne" stand on the threshold of Graves' fully developed mythological system. Further extension of the range of his imaginative insights into the relationship between woman, man and reality was to require the full resources of a highly-charged mythological language which would allow the poet to revive dormant areas of thought and feeling and articulate an understanding of the world and of humanity's destiny within it long since lost to posterity.

The Textual Interplay of The White Goddess

The genealogy of The White Goddess remains obscure, in part because the period leading up to its composition is as yet poorly understood by Graves' critics and biographers,¹⁹ and in part because, in reflecting upon the composition of the three different editions, (1948, 1952, 1961) Graves has adopted the technique of the Lapwing, whose "poetic meaning", he tells us, "is 'Disguise the Secret'²⁰". The efforts of Sidney Musgrove, though dated by the biographical findings, have done something to help us piece together the elements which combined to produce Graves' magnum opus, though Musgrove lacks a clear grasp of the methodology of The White Goddess itself.²¹ Even the extremely narrow focus of John Vickery's study, though fatally compromised by some very weak readings of the poems, does a great deal to enhance our understanding of the climate of ideas in which Graves gradually formulated his thesis.²² Behind the web of contradictory statements in which Graves wound the origins of The White Goddess,²³ it is possible to establish that the key ideas began to take shape in the early nineteen-forties as Graves gathered together the material for his mythological novels, The Golden Fleece²⁴ and King Jesus.²⁵ In addition, the vast card-index system Graves used in cooperation with his assistant and amanuensis, Karl Gay, seemed uniquely suitable for organizing fresh and disparate material as and when Graves stumbled across it.²⁶ Interestingly, this method had been pioneered by Graves, Gay and Riding as the means of compiling a huge Dictionary of Exact Meanings, a somewhat hare-brained scheme of Riding's, in which they intended to establish a bank of around 25,000 words with which poets could manage the confusions of the modern world.²⁷ Although Graves pulled out of this enterprise, the "historical grammar of poetic myth" that constitutes The White Goddess²⁸ retains the air of a dictionary of literary and mythological words and motifs.

We have seen how dedication to a mythically enlarged feminine principle was a feeling which developed out of the preoccupations of Graves' poetry. Similarly, an anthropological thread can be traced through some of his early writings and interests which leads eventually to the vast corpus of interrelated texts assembled in The White Goddess.

An early acquaintance with Welsh folklore, and, in particular, with the Mabinogion, in many ways the primary text upon which The White Goddess is foregrounded, is attested by Graves in an essay in which he explains how his father "became an enthusiastic pan-Celt".²⁹ His own youthful curiosity was seized especially by the story in which the "king of Dyfed...pursued the wizard Gwydion", and by the tale "of Llew Llaw's murder by the treacherous Flower-goddess Blodeuwedd".³⁰ These are episodes from the romance of Math the Son of Mathonwy,³¹ and the latter is later re-told in The White Goddess as the most perfect extant version of the single poetic theme to survive in British folklore.³²

It is difficult for us to trace the interconnections of myth and anthropology in the writings of Graves' early years because the evidence is so scanty, and no one has yet made a serious effort to discover what Graves was actually reading in those years.³³ However, mythological allusion is never employed simply as a veneer in any of Graves' writings. It is always used with one eye upon theories in which its significance can be understood. If we turn back for a moment to "The Marmosite's Miscellany", we can see that the "Mistress of escape and pity" who presides over the poet's lunar paradise is explicitly identified with the classical goddess of love:

Her madness is musical, kindly her mood,
 She is Dian no more when the sun quits the skies.
 She is the happy Venus of the hushed wood.
 So artless Actaeon may banquet his eyes
 At the crisp hair curling on her naked thighs,
 At her shapely shoulders, her breasts and her knees,
 She will kiss him pleasantly under tall trees.³⁴

There are certainly pitfalls in reading retrospectively, but there can be no doubt that this is the first icon of the Goddess to materialise in Graves' verse. The Actaeon allusion carries us to the heart of the binary relationship which underpins Graves' monomyth, that of the Goddess and her beloved victim who ventures into "the hushed wood" to undergo his ritual dismemberment for the love of the Muse.

The anthropological systems that Graves used to interpret his myth are difficult to recover, and I shall defer consideration of them until later in this chapter. But purely from the point of view of the interplay of texts, both mythological and anthropological, that goes on in The White Goddess, it is clear that Frazer's theory of the sacred king is lurking somewhere behind Graves' approach to "the happy Venus of the hushed wood". Seymour-Smith confirms that Graves first encountered Frazer through the influence of Rivers, commencing an interest which deepened during Graves' post-war Oxford studies. But he says little more than that, an evasion which leaves more questions unsolved than it answers.³⁵ Graves' first reference to Frazer appears to be in On English Poetry where, prefacing his analysis of certain early Christian poems, he writes:

...this section is addressed to those braver
minds who can read 'The Golden Bough' from cover
to cover and still faithfully, with no dawning
contempt, do reverence to the gods of their
youth.³⁶

At this stage, Graves seemed interested in the 'scientific' approach of The Golden Bough to the history of religions, its attempt to study ritual as an index of primitive man's relationship with the agricultural year. Soon he was to find that this analysis fell far short of his own purposes.

Nevertheless, there is room within even the positivist, clinical leanings of On English Poetry for the association of poetry with

certain mythological figures, such as Apollo,³⁷ though these have little of the polemical thrust of the later writings. The point seems to be to show that, for primitive people, poetry is a source of mana or power, a phenomenon the empirical approach of On English Poetry relates purely to its psychotherapeutic function.

A presentiment of the direction in which Graves' thought was to move in its swerve away from this reading of Frazer is to be seen in some of the features of his first novel, My Head! My Head!³⁸ written, Seymour-Smith informs us,³⁹ under the influence of Frazer's Folklore in the Old Testament.⁴⁰ The new departure of the novel is its attempt to reconstruct primitive Jewish religious and magical practices, Judaism having had no real prominence in Graves' speculations up to that point. The quirky, puzzle-solving Graves also emerges in the course of this novel, the plot of which centres upon the story of Elisha and the Shunamite woman, whose child Elisha magically restores to life. Graves uses his story-telling gifts to facilitate the kind of analysis of orthodox religious tradition which he will prosecute with much more mythopoeic vigour in the main arguments of The White Goddess. Central to this interrogation of received doctrine is the belief that behind the seamless narrative of orthodoxy lies a secret, a secret suppressed by the triumph of one made of discourse over all the others which compete for attention in the struggle that constitutes the text. In My Head! My Head! Elisha not only exhibits shamanistic skills only glimpsed through the veil of Scripture, he also initiates the Shunamite woman into a secret oral tradition which preserves the knowledge that Moses and the royal household of Israel passed on the sacred kingship of the Twelve Tribes through the female line. The divergence from a strictly Frazerian approach is made explicit in Elisha's account of the matriarchal origins of primitive Judaism, the first time this anthropological notion appears in Graves'

writings:

In those days was the beginning of religion...the mother ruled and all the possessions of the family were the mother's right. Latterly...man began to boast himself and say: 'If it were not for the man, no child would be born...Woman is not of the gods and man is her ruler'...This was the beginning of our present misery when woman was despised and put in subjection to man.⁴¹

In The Golden Bough, in the chapter entitled "Mother-Kin and Mother Goddesses", Frazer had accepted the likelihood of a matrilineal community having been one intermediate form of primitive social organization: "a social system in which maternity counted for more than paternity, descent being traced and property handed down through women rather than through men".⁴² However, Frazer had flatly rejected the view built upon the evidence of matrilineal kinship systems that anthropologists could go on to deduce the existence of wholesale matriarchal societies in which worship was given to a dominant female deity: "...the theory that under a system of mother-kin the women rule the men and set up goddesses for them to worship is so improbable in itself, and so contrary to experience that it scarcely deserves the serious attention which it appears to have received".⁴³ Ironically, and although his opinion has been confirmed by modern anthropology, Frazer's hostility to the theory of the matriarchy, as the rhetorical flourishes of the preceding quotation make clear, appears to have been born of a mixture of ethnocentrism and prejudice. It is the innate absurdity of matriarchy ("...so improbable in itself, and so contrary to experience...") that offends his Victorian worldview. Alienated from so much of the patriarchal culture that Frazer found so conducive to learning, Graves was to have no such problems accepting the likelihood of a primordial matriarchal state. We shall return to this conundrum later in this chapter.

Several poems dating from this period are coloured by the ideas Graves first advanced in My Head! My Head! and shed a little more light on the development of his viewpoint. The crucially important tree-symbolism of The White Goddess is anticipated in the poem "The Avengers",⁴⁴ a composition which clearly derives from the Taliesin verses in the Mabinogion known as "The Battle of the Trees". The presence of "The Avengers" in such an early volume (Whipperginny, 1922) not only looks forward to Graves' unscrambling of the riddles hidden in "The Battle of the Trees", it also bears witness to the lasting impact of the Mabinogion on his imagination:

*For bloom of quince yet caps the may,
The briar is held by Sharon's rose,
Monsters of thought through earth we stray,
And how remission comes, God knows.*

There is as yet no connection with the realm of the Goddess - a fact which undermines Musgrove's laborious attempt to interpret the poem using the later symbolism⁴⁵ - but the notion of the trees embodying certain rival ideas or conflicting human characteristics is fully developed. The strictly mythological treatment is seen to marry effectively with the reverence of nature that, as we have seen, is the dominant motive of Graves' best poetry.

Even the comparatively fallow years of prose speculation between 1930 and 1945, overshadowed by the production of the Claudius novels, saw Graves assembling the texts, and the textual procedures, which were later homologized in The White Goddess. A series of prose-poems, entitled "As It Were Poems" appeared in his 1934 anthology⁴⁶ experimenting with the riddling, question-and-answer techniques of Celtic mythology and strewing the page with unconnected fragments of Jewish and Hellenic folklore said to be challenges to the orthodoxy of scripture or the classical myths. The most successful of these is an

invocation in which the poet addresses a Goddess asking: "And how shall I call you, between the name concealed in the legends and the open name by which reason calls you and in which you reasonably answer..?"

The distinction between "open" and "closed" names in the poem is explained as the difference between a primordial name for the Great Goddess and those lesser names by which her devotees address her various avatars. The myth of the Great Goddess exists in embryonic form in this poem: many of the essential elements are present. In addition, the fascination with names presages not only the pursuit of etymologies in which The White Goddess abounds, but also secret names of the Goddess and her usurping consort-victims which are said to be enshrined in the vowel sequences of the primitive Pelasgian and Celtic alphabets. In the "As It Were" poem, the goddess presents herself as:

Isis...In Egypt she was the holy name of the
year of holy months:...Every new moon crowned her
...and she became the Moon itself, the single
head of variety, Hecate by name. And Lilith, the
owl of wisdom.

The same kind of syncretism attends her consort, who is enlarged into a single primordial deity of whom the gods of traditional mythology are only aspects:

So likewise Osiris was my great meddling, Osiris
the triple-named. He was Apollo...He was Dionysus
...And he was Pluto...Every year he rose again
from the dead, but every year returned to the
dead again.

The universalization of all these male and female divinities shows Graves beginning to assemble his muddle of mythic motifs into a coherent whole. The narrative of the single poetic theme is yet to emerge from the barely-connected ideas, but the principal anthropological

and religious doctrines into which it will resolve itself are already exercising a powerful magnetism in Graves' thought.

The texts in which the symbolism of the Goddess and her worship blossomed into a fully-fledged system of mythopoeic thought were the novels King Jesus and The Golden Fleece. Interestingly, in each of these stories Graves dramatises a period or an incident in which the cult of the Great Goddess is under attack from the later patriarchal faiths of the Occident. In King Jesus, Jesus is depicted as the prophet of a new wave of patriarchal monotheism which, he believes, will "destroy the works of the Female"⁴⁷ and usher in the Kingdom of Israel's Father-God. The argonaut-questers in The Golden Fleece are primarily the servants of the Father-god Zeus in search of his trophy stolen by the Goddess-worshipping Colchians for whom it is a symbol of Zeus the Ram's subordination to the all-seeing Goddess. In King Jesus, Jesus' militant devotion to the Father brings to an end the sacred Kingship of Israel of which he is the last heir, but the Goddess wins a strange victory over him by presiding over his ritual sacrifice on the cross of her sacred tree. Similarly, the argonauts succeed in retrieving the fleece for Zeus' shrine at Dodona. But unknown to most of the Minyans, Jason and Orpheus have already won the blessing of the Goddess for their venture, who tells them through her oracle that she welcomes the return of the fleece as a reminder to Zeus' priests of "the humiliation I once forced him to accept at my hands".⁴⁸ It seems that the prose-writing side of Graves' imagination found itself particularly well attuned to moments of tension in the history of religions; periods and cultures when belief systems were in transition, the older matriarchal faiths yielding to the growing influence of the celestial deities of the new patriarchal social order.

The story of the argonauts' quest for the fleece is told within a

narrative framework which itself suggests Graves' growing confidence in expounding the secrets which lie hidden behind the artifice of the classical myths. The framework also displays Graves' fascination with texts within texts, a formal characteristic which imitates the infinitely regressing secrets of the Goddess. The Golden Fleece is prefaced by a ritual "Invocation" to the ghost of Little Ancaeus, "oracular hero", whose shrine Graves believes to have been set up near his home village of Deya in Majorca.⁴⁹ The presence of the shrine so far from Greece is explained in the Prologue which also establishes Little Ancaeus as the narrator of the story. By then an old man, Ancaeus has left Greece in dismay at the continuing expansion of the Olympian, patriarchal religion. He is seized by the men of the Goat fraternity who live on Majorca, and brought before the Priestess of the Orange Grove, a servant of the Triple Goddess. She is incredulous at his tales of patrilineal descent, monogamous marriage and father-gods: "'Who may the Father God be? How can any tribe worship a Father? What are fathers but the occasional instruments that a woman uses for her pleasure and for the sake of becoming a mother?'"⁵⁰ Troubled by the new-fangled ideas of which Ancaeus speaks, the Priestess orders his sacrifice, but not before she has invited him to tell the tale of the argonauts, and after his death, she raises a tomb to honour his ghost.

The achievement of The Golden Fleece lies in its detailed evocation of a primitive and barbaric society at a time of important transitions. It is a totemistic society, with the various racial and regional groups arranged into animal fraternities with their own totem-god. Hence the Centaurs are represented as men of a horse-clan controlling the access-routes to certain areas of the Peloponnese. The savagery of this civilization is conveyed in the course of the novel as part of the deep pattern of life, life regarded by several of the characters

as unquestioning service to the Triple Goddess, in whom suffering holds forth the prospect of eventual rest. Graves acknowledges a specific debt to Frazer's Totem and Exogamy,⁵¹ and subtly translates Frazer's detailed picture of tribal African society to the Greek heroic age. But his own underlying assumptions go far beyond Frazer's arguments:

...the seizure of the Fleece was an episode in a religious conflict between the supporters of the matriarchal Moon Goddess of the "Pelasgians" and those of the patriarchal Thunder God of the Greeks.⁵²

The self-disclosure of the Goddess occurs most fully in the historical prelude to the main action of the novel, when she is made manifest to her acolyte Phrixus:

I am the Triple Mother of Life, the mistress of all the Elements, the original Being, the Sovereign of Light and Darkness, the Queen of the Dead, to whom no God is subject...I have names innumerable. In Phrygia I am Cybele; in Phoenicia, Ashtaroth; in Egypt, Isis...Others name me Diana, Agdistis, Marianae, Dindymene, Hera, Juno, Musa, Hecate.⁵³

Something of this revelation is granted Jason when he seeks the Goddess' guidance, in a chapter the title of which contains Graves first use of the Triple Mother's most powerful name: "The White Goddess Approves the Voyage".⁵⁴

The important mythographic techniques devised by Graves for the recovery of the priority of the Goddess also declare themselves for the first time in The Golden Fleece, when he discusses his method of reinterpreting the myths in order to find their concealed meaning:

The archaic Greeks, like the American Indians, recorded current events pictographically both in art and in poetry, and when by lapse of time the original meaning of a pictographic composition was forgotten, a new meaning was invented that

satisfied contemporary curiosity. A poetic pictograph was called a "myth" by the Greeks...⁵⁵

The 'pictographic' approach has, as we shall see, some precedent in the work of the Cambridge Ritualists. For Graves, it is the procedure which most clearly illustrates the contest of discursive practices of which myth is the scene. Initially an illustration of some important religious truth, the pictograph is deliberately misread by the new religious dispensation in order to incorporate it into the ascendant body of beliefs. The task of the mythographer is to re-read the pictograph in order to restore its original meaning, a view which presupposes a fixed and stable relation between signifier and signified:

There has been an accidental or wilful misunderstanding of all pictographs connected with the Moon Goddess. For instance, her ritual marriage as Pasiphae ("She who shines for all") with Minos the Sun God, to whom the Bull was sacred, became obscenely interpreted by Classical writers as a perverted passion by Pasiphae, a sister of Aeetes, and Circe, for a sacred bull - of which the unnatural product was a bull-headed monster, the Minotaur.⁵⁶

In Graves' thought, the matriarchal interpretation contains the 'true', the 'original', meaning of the pictographic text which the elite consciousness of the poet can rediscover. This places Graves' approach in a highly authoritarian relation to the text, which revives those critical fears that myth is a means of closing the text to an interplay of possible readings.

The 'pictograph' method receives further important refinements in King Jesus where it emerges with a new name and a more precise definition when Graves reflects upon the "composition of the early historical books" of the Bible:

...to the parts not already existing in, say, the ninth century B.C...were added anecdotes based on

deliberate misinterpretation of an ancient set of ritual icons captured by the Hebrews...A similar technique of misinterpretation - let us call it iconotropy - was adopted in ancient Greece as a means of confirming the Olympian religious myths at the expense of the Minoan ones which they superseded.⁵⁷

He goes on to repeat the Pasiphae example, and then adds a conclusion which justifies the poet-mythographer's reversal of the process, a 'trope' which, of course, cashes out as itself simply another iconotropic figuration:

In iconotropy the icons are not defaced or altered, but merely interpreted in a sense hostile to the original cult. The reverse process, of reinterpreting Olympian or Jahvistic patriarchal myths in terms of the mother-right myths which they have displaced, leads to unexpected results.⁵⁸

From this point on in his writings, iconotropy, the deliberate misreading of received texts in order to reconstruct a mythical original, is the dominant trope of Graves' mythography, a version of clinamen which expresses the essential doubleness of myth by holding on to the static image whilst swerving away from the meaning that orthodox (patriarchal) culture has inscribed upon it.

The character of Jesus reveals the full potential of iconotropy more completely than any other area of Graves' fiction. Jesus emerges in the course of the narrative as the supreme antagonist of the Goddess, intent upon contesting every one of her attributes in order to throw down her image before the authority of the supreme Allfather. Jesus is a fully anointed sacred king who rejects his role within the pattern of the single poetic theme. By a massive effort of individual intellect, asceticism and self-denial, Jesus wrests himself away from the symbolic influence of the Goddess and sets about the creation of the kingdom of the patriarchal God.

Jesus represents the opposite of the principle of submission in which

the devotees of the Goddess should immerse themselves, celebrating whatever joys and sufferings emanate from her. He deliberately raises himself up as the Goddess' opponent, the apotheosis of will:

As a sacred king, the last legitimate ruler of an immensely ancient dynasty, his avowed intention was to fulfil all the ancient prophecies that concerned himself and bring the history of his House to a real and unexceptionable conclusion. He intended by an immense exercise of power and perfect trust in God the Father...to break the lamentable cycle of birth, procreation, death and rebirth in which both he and his subjects had been involved since Adam's day.⁵⁹

Unlike many of the patriarchs, Jesus does not act in simple ignorance of the Goddess. He works actively to overcome her power. Aware that his royal ancestry makes him the beloved victim, the year-god who must suffer death and rebirth, Jesus symbolically enters the Sun-circle where, in a state of trance, he subdues three out of four of the calendar-beasts in which his fate is represented:

At noon the month of thirty days and nights was over, and out of the circle Jesus stepped; the lion, goat and seraph, discrete again, following subserviently at his heels. Thereafter he had authority over these three Powers: over Anger, Lust and Fear.⁶⁰

This is Jesus' repudiation of his role, though the presence of a fourth beast in the circle, a white bull who refuses to be subdued, "troubled him exceedingly"⁶¹ because it represented the Goddess' continuing influence over him.

The cycle of death and rebirth is the heart of the monomyth. Jesus seeks to break from the cycle by contradicting the rule which should make him consort with the priestess of the Goddess. He takes his wife in a chaste marriage, in the belief that sexual abstinence and a ban on procreation will break the Goddess' power over him:

He said in a clear voice: "I am your King, and I

have come not to renew but to make an end.
 Beloved, let us not do the act of darkness,
 which is the act of death. You are my sister!.."

By these words he chastely denied her the
 consummation of marriage. A silence as if of
 death fell on the astonished assembly; while
 Mary the Queen first flushed and then blanched.⁶²

Jesus' most militant opposition to the Goddess comes in the episode in the novel when he challenges her priestess Mary the Hairdresser (Mary Magdalene) to an iconotropic contest in which they struggle over the interpretation of a series of ancient icons. Jesus' purpose is to appropriate the images contained in the icons for his own vision of the Kingdom of God based upon the Law, the Prophets and the Histories of Israel. He imposes his will on each icon by relating it to the scriptures, an action which establishes the priority of written texts over the pictographic, and imposes a new orthodoxy over ritually radiant emblems. At each stage, Jesus' radically new interpretation is endorsed by the formula "For so it is written".⁶³

Mary resists, asserting her faith in a phrase which reverberates again in one of Graves' most important doctrinal poems: "'Here is one story and one story only'".⁶⁴ She takes up the combat by arguing that the tablets tell

...the story of the ancient covenant from which
 the Ark takes its name: the covenant sworn between
 my Mistress and the twin kings of Hebron; that
 she will share her love and her anger equally
 between them so long as they obey her will.⁶⁵

Mary goes through the icon series ritually expounding the story of the Great Goddess' dealings with her twin consorts, episodes from which appear to be recorded pictographically in the stone. But at each stage Jesus rejects her reading, determining instead to read the image according to the traditions of scripture and the story of God's dealings with the House of Israel:

"Not so: for here the shepherd's wife takes and suckles Adam, while my Mistress, the First Eve, stands apart, watching."

"No, but Pharaoh's daughter finds Moses among the bulrushes and consigns him to Jochebed, his own mother. For so it is written."

"Not so: for here my Mistress, the First Eve, restores her virginity by bathing in the fish-pool of Hebron and becomes the King's daughter, my Mistress, the Second Eve."

"No, but King David from the roof of his palace sees the wife of Uriah the Hittite bathing and lusts after her. For so it is written."⁶⁶

Without the support of a full and flourishing religious culture, the interpretation of the icons proves to be completely arbitrary. Eventually, Jesus' will prevails, and Mary submits to his power, but not before she has reminded him of the bull he could not subdue and promised him that "'...when the Mother summons me to my duty, I will not fail her.'"⁶⁷ To the end, Jesus' singleminded pursuit of the Living God will brook no obstacles. But in his final crucifixion, which he takes to be the act which will usher in God's Kingdom, he unwittingly fulfils Mary's prophecy and finds himself acting out the part of the beloved victim sacrificed upon the death-tree.

Iconotropy continues into the methodology of The White Goddess itself, where it appears slightly redefined as

...a technique of deliberate misrepresentation by which ancient ritual icons are twisted in meaning in order to confirm a profound change in the existent religious system - usually a change from matriarchal to patriarchal - and the new meanings are embodied in myth.⁶⁸

Again and again Graves offers his readers iconotropic reinterpretations of ancient myths in order to reveal the "one story" which lies behind them. This is another prominent feature of the interplay of texts which surrounds and penetrates the narrative of The White Goddess.

Perhaps the most ambitious exercise in misreading which Graves essays in The White Goddess is his attempt to recover and then dissect

the archaic tree-alphabet which he believed sheltered the fundamental secrets of the Triple Goddess. Late in 1943,⁶⁹ Graves discovered the writings of an obscure and eccentric early nineteenth-century Celtologist, the Rev. Edward Davies. In his book Celtic Researches (1809),⁷⁰ Davies argued that the Beth-Luis-Nion and Boibel-Loth ancient Irish alphabets, long regarded by scholars as the pious forgeries of seventeenth-century antiquaries, were the genuine alphabets of pagan Celtic Britain. Moreover, Davies also argued that the alphabets shared important features in common with the Pelasgian alphabets of pre-Hellenic Greece. Davies also made tentative, if ill-informed, attempts to connect the BLN and BL sequences with particular trees and seasons of the year. His researches ended in a hopeless muddle, but Graves believed that they contained "...the key (the relations of bardic letters to months and seasons, which he himself doesn't realise...)...to Celtic religion: a key which unlocks a succession of doors in Roman and Greek religion..."⁷¹

The recognition of this key immediately set in motion for Graves a whole new approach to some of the puzzles his reading of the Mabinogion had thrown up. That Celtic Researches acted as the catalyst rather than the initiator of Graves' speculations on pagan alphabets is borne out by another episode in King Jesus, published only two years after he came across Davies' book: While serving a novitiate with the Essenes, Jesus, by the remarkable powers of his intellect, unearths a "...prime secret known only to the Elders of this Order..."⁷² He discovers that the huts in the holy compound are arranged to spell out a secret Hebrew variation of the primordial pagan alphabet. Moreover, Jesus has also worked out that the alphabet, when read correctly, relates the "calendar story" of the dying-and-rising god moving through his annual life-cycle under the aegis of the Great Goddess. Jesus, of course, abominates the alphabet and what he regards

as its blasphemous connotations:

"...To worship this bull-calf is idolatry, for the power of the Only God, who is timeless, is thereby denied. It is to honour the Female... the threefold demoness who is Mother, Bride and Layer-out to fallen man..."⁷³

Jesus goes on to expound an alternative reading of the alphabet which sees it as the bearer of the secret doctrines of the One God, hiding, in particular, the ineffable name of the God of Israel.

The debate about calendar mysteries in King Jesus proves that Graves had been working on the problem of the alphabets for some time prior to the publication of The White Goddess in 1948. The riddles of The White Goddess centre upon the intertextual relations of a number of early Celtic poems which Graves takes to be coded and deliberately scrambled religious texts in which the primitive alphabets are cleverly hidden. The congeries of Celtic poems invoked by Graves at the outset of The White Goddess revolve around each other in a fascinating, sometimes mesmerising, arrangement of themes centred upon the figure of Taliesin from the mystical Hanes Taliesin in the Mabinogion.

Graves argues that Taliesin recited the famous "Cad Goddeu" or "Battle of the Trees" poem at the court of Prince Maelgwyn, as the Romance makes clear, in order to humiliate the false poets or 'gleemen' of the court for not knowing the great religious secret hidden in the poem, which, Taliesin knew, pointed towards the source of all poetic inspiration. Contemporary understanding of this secret depends upon recognition of a fact first established for modern scholars by Davies and summarised by Graves to the effect that "in all Celtic languages trees means letters...and...the most ancient Irish alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion ('Birch-Rowan-Ash') takes its name from the first three of a series of trees whose initials form the sequence of its letters".⁷⁴ "The Battle of the Trees" is really to be read as an

intellectual battle in which two systems of letters confront one another, the one seeking to overthrow the other. Since other early accounts associate the Battle with the familiar folklore motif of the Guessing-of-the-God's-Name, Graves concludes that the poem records the displacement of one divinity by another in the national religion, one of the secrets of which Taliesin was apprised and his rivals knew nothing.

Once this textual paradigm is established, that "the purposely jumbled text of (the) "Battle of the Trees"...refers to a primitive British tradition of the capture of an oracular shrine by the guessing of a god's name",⁷⁵ Graves feels confident enough to take on the mantle of Taliesin and plunge into the textual labyrinth of Celtic and pre-Celtic poetry. This involves Graves placing himself, in relation to these texts, in precisely the same position as he believes Taliesin himself to have been in, that is, forearmed with the necessary poetic intuitions for acquiring mastery over the text, for uncovering the text's 'true' meaning which like-minded poets have deliberately concealed.

He begins by culling from the "Battle of the Trees" elements of a "Song of Blodeuwedd", a hauntingly beautiful lyric in which the Flower-maiden from the Mabinogion speaks of her creation by the wizard Gwydion, an episode which, as he later confirms, properly belongs with the narrative of the Goddess' dealings with her lovers. Graves then goes on to show that the answers to the riddles Taliesin sets in the "Song of Taliesin" are a list of names corresponding to the names of the letters in the Druidic alphabet. This alphabet, Graves suggests, known as the BLF or Boilbel-Loth, spells out the life-story of a Celtic Sun-hero of the Hercules type. The consonants relate his story from miraculous birth to sacred death, while the vowels

"characterize the progress of Hercules through the five stations of the year, typified by the five petals of the Lotus-cup - Birth, Initiation, Marriage, Rest from Labour, and Death".⁷⁶ Hidden within the alphabet is the secret name of the year-god whose story it tells.

Before attempting to unravel the name, Graves pauses to consider the alternative letter sequence, which he believes antedates the BLF, the Beth-Luis-Nion, and which therefore harbours a still earlier version of the Sun-hero's story and a still earlier version of his name. Graves combats the view that the BLN possesses no real antiquity by showing that its sequence of tree-letters follows an annual cycle, from midwinter to midwinter, backed up by the powerful mythological associations of the trees themselves. He also tries to show that its letters bear strong affinities with Hebrew magical alphabets concealed in Biblical folklore. The priority of the BLN sequence is attested primarily in the mystical poem from the Taliesin corpus in which it is secretly preserved: "The Song of Amergin".

Some two-thirds of The White Goddess are taken up with the pursuit of the Divine Name, involving Graves in a multi-level iconotropic argument with the surface narratives of Celtic, Greek and Hebrew mythology. His strategy is ruthlessly syncretic: tissues of bizarre etymologies and concordances of motif and story are woven around the myths to bind them together around the tree-letter-calendar narrative of the Sun-hero. Apart from his encyclopedic grasp of myths from a wide diversity of cultures, the other feature of the book's approach which marks it off as the product of Graves' imagination is the closely-observed detail of the natural world. The tree-lore and sensitivity to changes of season, weather and landscape emerge directly from the concerns of his best poetry. Augmented by a Frazerian wealth of material derived from folk-custom and ritual, the sheer accumulation of evidence requires enormous powers of organization

and interpretation. These skills, Graves asserts, are the prerogative of the poet, and throughout the quest for what he terms "The Roebuck in the Thicket",⁷⁷ the figure with whom he most clearly identifies is Taliesin, around whom swirl the mystical texts in which a supreme religio-poetic secret is concealed:

Taliesin's name in Welsh means 'radiant brow'... but the 'Tal' syllable is often present in the primitive names of Hercules...In Greece he was Atlas Telamon, and 'Atlas', like 'Telamon' was derived from the root Tla or Tal which contains the senses 'take upon oneself', 'dare' and 'suffer'.⁷⁸

These epithets not only align Graves with the heroic insights of the shaman-poet Taliesin, they also reach out to the persona who inhabits Graves' love-poems, the servant of Woman who dares to love in the full knowledge that suffering will be his lot.

The pursuit of the Divine Name from the BLN sequence embedded in "The Song of Amergin" culminates in Graves' finding that the vowels originally spelled out the name of the Great Goddess, who was regarded by the early Bronze Age peoples of Europe as the supreme deity, with the consonants recording the annual life-cycle of her consort-son, conceived mythically as a pair of twins, the gods of the waxing and waning year. This was the ultimate name fought over at the Battle of the Trees,

...between the White Goddess...for whose love the god of the waxing year and of the waning year were rivals, and...Immortal Apollo, or Beli, who challenged her power. In other words, the sacred name IEVOA, or JIEVOAO its enlargement, revealed by Amathaon to Gwydion and used as a means of routing Bran, was the name of the five-fold Goddess Danu.⁷⁹

This "religious revolution", Graves asserts, "which brought about the alphabetic changes in Greece and Britain was a Jewish one, initiated

by Ezekiel (622-570 BC)".⁸⁰ It involved the alteration of the alphabet in order to efface the Goddess' name from the vowel-sequence and replace it with the name of the Allfather, no longer regarded as the consort of the Goddess, but rather as a celestial supreme being under the tutelage of no other divinity. The supercession of the BLN by the BLF alphabet was the result of the western extension of the new Father-God's power, whose most common name in the West was Apollo or one of its cognates, but whose roots ran back to the JIEVOAO or Yahweh of the semitic patriarchs. His secret identity "was taken up by the Greek-speaking Jews of Egypt and borrowed from them by the Pythagoreans...The Name must have come to Britain by way of Southern Gaul where the Pythagoreans were established early".⁸¹ This was the supreme secret of which Taliesin had been in possession when he recited "The Song of Taliesin" and "The Song of Amergin". The juxtaposition of the two poems was really the juxtaposition of the two alphabets and the Divine Names they contained. The five vowel-stations of the BLN, as rendered poetically in the Amergin chant, did not simply disclose the name of an earlier form of year-god. They proclaimed the true sovereign name of the Triple Goddess who had held sway prior to the existence of any gods.

Graves' habitual and obsessive brooding over texts or settings in which some trace of the divinity of woman might be found reaches its final form in this work. By possessing the very alphabets in which her signature is to be found, Graves appropriates all poetic language for the themes made dominant in his own poetry. Taliesin-Graves has the knowledge, the gnosis, with which he can manipulate the elements, the building bricks, of myth and poetry to recover or reconstitute the Goddess' presence in a myriad of hitherto opaque texts, or at the interface of many texts. Moreover, this alphabet is also the key to a new and more all-embracing understanding of

the language of the seasons in which, as we have seen, the cycle of love expresses itself. Letters are trees are months of the Lunar Year, the consonants its temporal divisions, the vowels its five seasons, imitating the five seasons of man's life. The cool web of language - more importantly, of writing - extends its organizing influence outward, from the mythical Centre, which is the image of woman enthroned in the poet's consciousness, out across the landscape, investing key locations and incidents with a ritual significance. The focus of human existence is no longer simply the experience of love between man and woman. It is now transformed into a series of eternally-recurring moments in the drama of the year-god's relations with his Mistress, the consonants from which can only be rendered intelligible when the vowels take their place in the sequence. Graves seeks to connect the ritual calendar with the ongoing preoccupations of his work by restating the centrality of nature to an understanding of the monomyth:

...the Mother-and-Son myth is so closely linked with the natural year and its cycle of ever-recurring observed events in the animal and vegetable queendoms that it makes little emotional appeal to the confirmed townsman, who is informed of the passage of the seasons only by the fluctuation of his gas and electricity bills or by the weight of his underclothes.⁸²

Just as, at the heart of Graves' work, it is poetry which actuates the link between the self and nature, so within the project of The White Goddess it is "The Song of Amergin" which links poetic utterance, the religious secrets of the alphabet, the mythological connotations of trees, and the seasonal cycle of the year-god's sacred life. Graves' account of the relations is worth reproducing in full:⁸³

		God speaks and says	Trees of the month
Dec 24-Jan 20	B	I am a stag of seven tines or an ox of seven fights	Birch Beth

Jan 21-Feb 17	L	I am a wide flood on a plain,	Quick-beam (Rowan)	Luis
Feb 18-Mar 17	N	I am a wind on the deep waters,	Ash	Nion
Mar 18-Apr 14	F	I am a shining tear of the sun,	Alder	Fearn
Apr 15-May 12	S	I am a hawk on a cliff,	Willow	Saille
May 13-Jun 9	H	I am fair among flowers,	Hawthorn	Uath
Jun 10-July 7	D	I am a god who sets the head afire with smoke,	Oak	Duir
July 8-Aug 4	T	I am a battle-waging spear,	Holly	Tinne
Aug 5-Sept 1	C	I am a salmon in the pool,	Hazel	Coll
Sept 2-Sept 29	M	I am a hill of poetry,	Vine	Muin
Sept 30-Oct 27	G	I am a ruthless boar	Ivy	Gort
Oct 28-Nov 24	NG	I am a threatening noise of the sea,	Reed	Ngetal
Nov 25-Dec 22	R	I am a wave of the sea	Elder	Ruis
Dec 23		Who but I knows the secrets of the unhewn dolmen?		

The overthrow of the old Bronze Age year-god, Bran, at the Battle of the Trees is recorded in the revision of BLNFS to BLFSN because Fearn or Alder is Bran's sacred tree of resurrection related to spring. Nion or Ash is sacred to Gwydion or Odin, the Celtic version of the Allfather, and he is transferred to the first summer station in the new sequence.⁸⁴

It is Graves' contention that the Song, and the older alphabet, record the story of the year-spirit Dionysus or Bran or Celestial Hercules, the divine aspect of the sacred king who is the consort of the Great Goddess. The first six months, from Beth to Uath identify him as the Spirit of the Waxing Year presiding over growth and renewal. In Fearn his successor-self is born, "who was begotten at the midsummer orgies"⁸⁵ of the previous year, and who will take up his place at the following winter solstice. The Spirit of the Waxing Year submits joyfully to his ritual sacrifice in the month of Duir, the midsummer oak-month. There is no cause for mourning because his soul escapes to the Goddess' spiral castle or Island of Repose, and, instead, this is a period of joy and festivity. But Duir also sees the enthroned-

ment of the year-god's tanist, his dark twin or other self, who, as Spirit of the Waning Year, seeks out the soul of his rival to bring about his destruction. The pursuit of the year-god by his other self extends into the second six months of the year, with their imagery of increasing violence and barrenness, as the powers of the Spirit of the Waxing Year grow stronger. The chase ends eventually, when the earth succumbs to winter darkness, in the death-month of Elder or Ruis, when, perhaps in the form of a boar, the dark twin annihilates his elusive rival.

The final line of the poem, "Who but I knows the secrets of the unhewn dolmen?" refers to the dolmen arch shape into which, Graves believes, the consonants of the Beth-Luis-Nion should be arranged. The three sides of the rectangle, minus its base, see the letters running from B up to S, from S across to C, and from C down to the death-letter R, so that the consonants of birth and death face each other. This also marks out the calendrical cycle from spring, through summer, to autumn and winter, covering all the stations of the god's year.

The five missing vowels from the BLN can be recovered, Graves believes, encoded in an envoie appended to the poem which also exists in a pied form in the "Song of Taliesin":

A I am the womb of every holt,
 O I am the blaze on every hill,
 U I am the queen of every hive,
 E I am the shield to every head
 I I am the tomb to every hope.⁸⁶

The vowels form the threshold to the dolmen, bridging the gap between B and R, between birth and death, and marking out the five principal stations of the celestial victim's year. They also represent the five intercalated days of the New Year period, otherwise absent from the calendar, in which the soul of the murdered god awaits his rebirth. These days are not considered part of the spirit's annual cycle which

begins anew on the solstice-day of December 23, after the death-letter, with the question of the dolmen-secret. The answer to the solstice riddle is Horus, or Hercules or even Jesus - the Sun-child born as the light begins once more to overcome the darkness, and the Spirit of the Waxing Year begins anew his ascent of the cycle. The "tomb to every hope" is also "the womb of every holt", as the mysteries of death and rebirth meet in the dolmen:

A dolmen is a burial chamber, a 'womb of Earth', consisting of a cap-stone supported on two more uprights, in which a dead hero is buried in a crouched position like a foetus in the womb, awaiting rebirth. In spiral Castle (passage-burial), the entrance to the inner chamber is always narrow and low in representation of the entrance to the womb. But dolmens are used...as sacred doors through which the totem-clan initiate crawls in a ceremony of rebirth.⁸⁷

The five stations represented by the vowels of the dolmen-lintel cover not only the course of the year-god's cycle but the shaping experiences of all who embrace the love of the Goddess in her "three aspects of maiden, nymph and hag...expressing the five stations of her year: Birth, Initiation, Consummation, Repose and Death".⁸⁸ Read iconotropically, of course, the five vowels spell out the hidden name of the White Goddess, "AOUEI", which is also the action of her all-creating breath informing the cosmic serpent, Ophion, with life at the first instant of creation. It was this same name that the Hebrews took captive and respelt as Jahveh, the supreme Allfather.

The reference to "spiral Castle" in Graves' discussion of the dolmen takes us to the heart of one of the five stations in his myth. Another of Taliesin's poems, the cryptic "Preiddeu Annwn", or "Spoils of Annwn" refers to the translation of a selection of Celtic heroes to Caer Sidhi or Caer Arianhrod, the Castle of the Silver Wheel. Graves associates this motif with the many stories of pagan heroes

trapped in castles or spinning fortresses: "The castle that they entered - revolving, remote, gloomy, royal, lofty, cold, the abode of the Perfect Ones, with four corners, entered by a dark door on the shelving side of a hill - was the castle of death or the Tomb⁸⁹." Graves further associates the spiral castle with dolmen of the New Grange type which, he explains, possess all the characteristics of oracular shrines from where heroes were encouraged "to return...to answer questions of importance"⁹⁰ Marked by "the Ogham letters B and I...dedicated respectively to Inception and Death"⁹¹, the entrance to these shrines is the entrance to the last station:

...the sacred kings of Bronze Age Ireland, who were solar kings of a most primitive type, to judge by the taboos which bound them and by the reputed effect of their behaviour on crops and hunting, were buried beneath these barrows; but their spirits went to 'Caer Sidi', the Castle of Ariadne, namely Corona Borealis. Thus the pagan Irish could call New Grange 'Spiral Castle' and, revolving a forefinger in explanation, could say, 'Our King has gone to Spiral Castle': in other words, 'he is dead'.⁹²

The spiral pattern "typifies death and rebirth"⁹³ by symbolizing the wheel of incarnations upon which the soul of the suffering hero is trapped by his total obedience to the Goddess, highlighting his capacity to endure for her sake:

The sacred king, then, is a Sun-King and returns at death to the Universal Mother, the White Moon Goddess, who imprisons him...The Sun-god is born at midwinter when the sun is weakest...therefore his representative, the Sun-King, is killed at the summer solstice.⁹⁴

At the centre of the spiral of death and rebirth is the island of Repose in which the hero is given brief respite from his labours and earns the right to speak out as an oracle of her wisdom:

...the burial place of the dead king was a barrow

on an island, either in a river or the sea, where his spirit lived under charge of oracular and orgiastic priestesses; but his soul went to the stars and there hopefully awaited rebirth in another king.⁹⁵

The influence of the Goddess extends not only through time and space, and across the barriers between life and death. In Graves' iconotropic reading she is seen to unite the celestial and the chthonic in a fashion which invests the whole of life with new meaning for her acolytes. Her fullest apotheosis is as a lunar trinity whose sovereignty over the natural and supernatural realms corresponds to what Graves considers to be the three fundamental roles of woman within the individual and collective life of the race: as maiden-nymph, mother and wise-woman of the tribe:

As Goddess of the Underworld she was concerned with Birth, Procreation and Death. As Goddess of the Earth she was concerned with the three seasons of Spring, Summer and Winter: she animated trees and plants and ruled all living creatures. As Goddess of the Sky she was the Moon, in her three phases of New Moon, Full Moon, and Waning Moon. This explains why from a triad she was so often enlarged to an ennead. But it must never be forgotten that the Triple Goddess, as worshipped for example at Stymphalus, was a personification of primitive woman - woman the creatress and destructress. As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag.⁹⁶

Graves' ambition is nothing less than absolute at this point in his monomyth. His poetic authority, resting upon his ability to command the secrets locked into the Taliesin texts, transcends the limitations of historical, or even poetic, discourse, and assumes a rhetorical stance remote from the scientific language favoured by the modern age, and most helpfully understood as a variation of the mythopoeic mode. As initiator into the secrets of the Triple Muse, Graves speaks in a voice which is a concatenation of the

anthropologist and the mystagogue; in a language which highlights the triumph of the will over the unyielding obduracy of the text. The iconotropic imagination transforms the innate secrecy of religio-poetic narrative, its esoteric radiance which the rational eye reads as vacuity, into pure meaning, expressed in the figure which repeats itself like a neurotic leitmotif throughout Graves' writing: whiteness.

This is the whiteness which snowblinds the carnal senses, vexing the reader with the conundrum of whether it is the colour which is all colours, or the colour which is no colours - replete with meaning, or devoid of meaning. "I write of her as the White Goddess", Graves writes, "because white is her principal colour, the colour of the first member of her moon-trinity, but...the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination."⁹⁷ Whiteness, throughout its association with the Goddess in Graves' work, simultaneously signifies beauty and terror, a blessing and a curse, fullness and emptiness, each of these dichotomies inscribed upon the natural history of the word, the text from which the word absorbs meaning:

Britain derives its earliest name, Albion...from Albina ('the White Goddess')...The name Albina, a form of which was also given to the River Elbe (Albis in Latin); and which accounts for the German words elven, an elf-woman, alb, elf and alpdrucken, the nightmare or incubus, is connected with the Greek words alphos, meaning 'dull-white leprosy' (Latin albus), alphiton, 'pearl-barley', and Alphito, 'the White Goddess'...of Argos... The word Argos itself means 'shimmering white'...⁹⁸

The interplay of etymologies provides a synchronic and diachronic matrix of language upon which the generic image of the ubiquitous White Goddess can be supported. In a footnote to the same passage Graves cites enthusiastically Herman Melville's eloquent meditation

upon "the contradictory emotions aroused by the word 'white'",⁹⁹ anticipating his own later acknowledgement that "The whiteness of the Goddess has always been an ambivalent concept.

In one sense it is the pleasant whiteness of
pearl-barley, or a woman's body, or milk, or
unsmutched snow; in another it is the horrifying
whiteness of a corpse, or a spectre, or leprosy.¹⁰⁰

This essential duplicity of whiteness in Graves' text can never be resolved, for it is the basic dialectic out of which his most significant work has burgeoned, the tension between two different kinds of awareness: on the one hand the recognition that poetry is deeply bound up with the fundamental forces of life, that it hovers over the whiteness of pure, uncircumscribed meaning, the aura of the great secret of life itself; on the other, the dreadful fear that poetry is an illusory bulwark between the finitude of the self and death, that it hovers over the white, meaningless blankness of the void, before which being flares brightly for a moment, and is gone.

Poetry, Myth and the Theory of the Matriarchy

Graves admits to having borrowed the phrase "single poetic theme" from his friend "the Welsh poet Alun Lewis who wrote just before his death in Burma, in March 1944, of 'the single poetic theme of Life and Death...the question of what survives of the beloved."¹⁰¹ Graves' fullest account of the Theme, unencumbered by the need to justify it by the pursuit of bizarre etymologies and arcane alphabets, occurs in one of the first lectures he gave as Oxford's Professor of Poetry, in a passage which is, in effect, a cento of quotations from The White Goddess:

The Theme, briefly, recounts the birth, life,

death and resurrection of the Demigod of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern his losing fight against the Demigod of the Waning Year, his rival for love of the all-powerful and inscrutable Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the Demigod of the Waxing Year; the rival is his twin, his second self, his weird. All true poetry...celebrates some incident or other of this ancient story; and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial legacy that they also assert themselves in dreams and paranoiac visions.¹⁰²

The association between poetry and primitive religion is made clear in this passage. The mythopoeic focus for the convergence of the two kinds of discourse is the Goddess, a figure who includes all of Graves' previous visions of woman, and who provokes the kind of dream-state in which the psyche is made alert to the forms of awareness only poetry and myth can communicate:

The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman who will suddenly transform herself into sow, bitch, mare, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag...The test of a poet's vision, one might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess, and of the secret island over which she rules...because this is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of love and terror - the female spider or the queen-bee whose courtship means murder.¹⁰³

The Goddess is the locus of all the contradictory feelings with which Graves' life as a writer has been afflicted. The pastoral oasis which had been invaded from without by the forces of a violent world, and subverted from within by the dissenting urges of the psyche is here rendered as "the secret island", governed by a principle which brings together love and violence, suffering and joy, in an almighty synthesis. Just as the alter-ego who had dogged Graves' early life is recuperated as a vital element in the ongoing drama, so, that caprice or fate, whose overthrow of love had been an important feature of

the earlier verse, is assimilated to the Theme as an aspect of the emotional intensity of erotic love and its tumults.

The single poetic theme possesses enormous syncretic potential. It is equipped with an array of motifs flexible enough to assimilate most of the truly meaningful experiences of life into its symbolic universe, its narrative. This power, I would suggest, derives from its basis in myth, for as Graves reminds us: "The Theme originally concerned a seasonal war between the Spirit of Growth and the Demon of Drought".¹⁰⁴ Graves repeats the familiar romantic and modernist identification of prehistory with the remote reaches of human consciousness. The obsessive search for 'origins' has a dual trajectory: extending downward into the deep centres of human response and interaction; extending backwards to a primitive past. In both cases the ultimate goal is some imagined unity of being equated with the proper organization of desire and the rightful ordering of relations between the sexes:

It seems that at the barley harvest, when the blazing Palestinian sun dried up all grass and herbs, Anatha, incarnate in a priestess-queen, annually ordered the crucifixion of her sacred consort as a means of placating the Demon of Drought; then took the executioner into her bed until the autumn rains should come - after which she destroyed him, chose another sacred king: in theory the crucified man risen from the dead. This ritual practice ceased when the patriarchal cattle people swept down from the north-east, over-running the queendoms; and a Bull-king, or Father-god, gradually assumed the Goddess's powers.¹⁰⁵

The historical (or pseudo-historical) dimension of the Theme has profound implications for poetry, because, as Graves is at pains to remind his readership, "poetry began in the matriarchal age, and derives its magic from the moon, not the sun".¹⁰⁶ The sun is the emblem of the fullest realisation of the character of the Father-god, Celestial

Apollo, whose adherents compose not poetry but "time-proved sentiments in time-honoured forms...Apollonian poetry is essentially court-poetry written to uphold the authority delegated to poets by the King (regarded as Roi Soleil, Apollo's vice-regent) on the understanding that they celebrate and perpetuate his magnificence and terror"¹⁰⁷.

What Apollonian poets lack is a sense of the mysterium tremendum which marks off the elite consciousness of the Muse-poet, conferring upon him and his work a hieratic status. The true poet acquires his status as priest-shaman-poet by virtue of the knowledge he comes to possess of the secret which lies at the heart of all poetry, and, indeed, if the name concealed in the alphabet is correctly understood, at the heart of language itself. This knowledge should be seen as a means of equipping consciousness with the necessary faculties for overcoming the arbitrariness of language; as a trope which posits the priority of consciousness to the text; which argues that consciousness occupies a mythical space anterior to language rather than inscribed by language. The true poet carries in his memory a name which affords him a magical control of language and allows him to master those forces from the unconscious or within words themselves which would otherwise rise up and overwhelm him. The "monomaniac raving, paranoia and eccentric behaviour" of modern poets, Graves says, conceals "their unhappy lack of a secret", and he laments that in modern culture "there are no poetic secrets now".¹⁰⁸ The true poet's contact with a remote level of mythical origins - of words, rituals, stories, beliefs - drives back the mutinous interplay of competing meanings and imposes upon them a mantle of order and uniformity. Language is controlled by the location of key words in a symbolic order, an action itself inscribed upon the etymology of secrecy, which stems from "the Indo-European root arc - meaning 'protection' from which we derive such latin words as arceo, 'I ward off', arca,

'an ark', and arcana, 'religious secrets'".¹⁰⁹ By these gestures the unmotivated relation between the signifier and the signified is overcome, and consciousness re-established at the centre of meaning.

As if to compensate for the dangers inherent in removing the poet from the sphere of ordinary discourse, Graves takes pains to reverse the process and relocate the esoteric mysteries of poetic inspiration in "the relations of man and woman".¹¹⁰ His discussion of the role of the personal muse in the poet's affective life figuratively re-enacts the process by which the Goddess is disclosed to her devotees:

By ancient tradition, the White Goddess becomes one with her human representative - a priestess, a prophetess, a queen mother. No Muse-poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident...A Muse-poet falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse.¹¹¹

Once again, the symbolic resources of the myth function to reconcile opposites, on this occasion by humanizing the experience of poetic inspiration and anchoring it to the vision of real women which inhabits the poetry. But the prose argument is to a degree in tension with the poetic, seeking to reverse the process evident in the poetry by which women were elevated to the status of a cosmic feminine principle:

The Muse is a deity, but she is also a woman, and if her celebrant makes love to her with second-hand phrases and ingenious verbal tricks that he uses to flatter her son Apollo she rejects him more decisively even than she rejects the tongue-tied or cowardly bungler.¹¹²

There is an element of overcompensation here which produces an awkward clash between the rhetoric of myth and the commonplaces of human interaction. It is a division which Graves never really heals

because it is from the gap between everyday experience perceived to be deracinated and unfulfilling, and the wondrous exaltation of a lost age of mythic wholeness that the need to write poetry emerges. The impoverishment of modern life is readily encapsulated in the condemnation of Apollonian thought. The aesthetically satisfying synthesis of love, violence and fear held out by myth effectively sublimates the poet's need for merely human happiness combined with ritual ecstasy:

No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: 'Kill! kill! kill!' and 'Blood! blood! blood!'¹¹³

The single poetic theme allows Graves to mystify the crises - be they personal or social - which everywhere inform his writings. In his darkest vision of poetry, 'Nature' becomes a realm ultimately beyond reproach and alteration, not amenable to the human will but determinant of human destiny. In their frequently blind incomprehension of the energies which infest them, Graves' ritually maimed lovers define a reality as absolute and irrefutable as anything found in myth. The naked king crucified to the lopped oak is the sublimated form of all the emotions with which Graves found himself in conflict: his own sexuality and fear of the flesh; the violence of the trenches from which he recoiled in horror yet in the face of which he found his profoundest experience of endurance and self-sacrificial brotherhood; the dithyrambic beat of poetry, so cruelly implicated in the sado-masochistic torments of love. Graves the soldier-poet needs no reminding from anyone of the full implications of killing and blood. But by a huge feat of sublimation, love and

violence are taken up into the vessel of his imagination and made acceptable forms of the ritual of life, ceremonial experiences in the endless cycles of destruction and renewal where catastrophe has already happened innumerable times and will continue to occur. Myth takes the terror out of time by assuring the poet that no element of his suffering is lost, that it is all part of the pattern where every death holds forth the prospect of rebirth, and in which the poet is asked to do no more than 'dare', 'take upon himself', and 'endure'.

It is not possible to agree, then, with John Vickery when he insists that Frazer is Graves' main authority for the views expressed in The White Goddess.¹¹⁴ Graves' vision is too tendentious, too idiosyncratic, too much informed by his own personal obsessions and inner biography to rest easily within the methodology of the Cambridge School. Despite the peppering of references to Frazer and the occasional borrowing from Harrison or Cook, the main use to which The Golden Bough is put by Graves is as a repository of motifs, customs and ceremonies utilized as part of an essentially imaginative endeavour the anthropological premises of which Frazer would have deplored.

Graves' theory of myth, set out most succinctly in his compendium The Greek Myths, does show some small indebtedness to Harrison: "True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries and the like".¹¹⁵ In Chapter 5 of Prologomena, Harrison discussed the possibility of pictographic versions of the Perseus myth having originally depicted mask-wearing priestesses admitting an acolyte.¹¹⁶ But for Harrison this was an exceptionally rare occurrence and admitted of no possibility of 'iconotropy', which she does not discuss. Once again, Harrison, along with Cook, is

used not so much for the theory employed, but for the unrivalled plethora of mythological images and stories which her works contain. The connection between myth and ritual, which, it is true, the Cambridge School first pioneered, is used for purposes which would have been alien to the outlook of their anthropology.

A larger debt is owed by Graves to the theories of the much-reviled anthropologist Dr Margaret Murray whose The Witch-Cult in Western Europe (1921)¹¹⁷ is quoted openly and tacitly at several important points in The White Goddess.¹¹⁸ Graves shares Murray's view that the witch-cult represented a survival of pagan chthonic practices in Christian medieval Europe, and he draws extensively upon her interpretation of rural magic and folklore, such as the Robin Hood myth and the May Day revels. However, Graves shifts the focus of attention away from the Lord of the Greenwood to his bride, the Merry Maid, or Maid Marian, whom he takes to be the peasantry's potent memory of the Great Goddess. Graves follows Murray in supporting the view that the witch-cult was a vehicle for the subversive forces of myth undermining the edifice of institutional Christianity. Although Murray's hypothesis has been severely criticized,¹¹⁹ a slightly more cautious form of it is implicit in the work of historians such as Jeffrey Russell, suggesting that in this area Graves is on slightly surer ground.

The anthropological arguments advanced by Graves in The White Goddess have been undermined primarily by a shift in the study of primitive religion away from the grand theory towards much more detailed analysis of the social institutions and kinship systems within which particular myths have currency. Ironically, what little credence has been lent to some of Graves' opinions has come from other versions of the grand theory which have tried to gather up the fragments of classical myth into wholesale visions of primitive society. The emphasis on violence

in Graves' reading of the myth finds some endorsement from the theories of the structuralist thinker, René Girard. Girard argues that the whole concept of the sacred, and the sacrificial actions which clothe it in meaning, stems from the attempts by primitive communities to control and channel the expression of violence in conduits which prevent it from threatening the social order.¹²⁰ Girard shares Graves' tendency for reading apparently innocuous myths as repressed records of some distant blood-ritual involving the sacrifice of scape-goats, but his work does not venture to suggest that a unified system of beliefs holds such practices together.

The most recent and intelligent revival of the grand theory approach has come from the new comparative mythology of Georges Dumézil. Dumézil and his disciples have argued for decades that the principal mythic narratives of the Greeks, Romans and Teutonic peoples suggest that the Indo-Europeans and their successor races possessed a tripartite form of social division into a priest-class, a warrior-class and an agricultural class.¹²¹ They claim that evidence of this tripartism can be discerned from a close reading of Indo-European mythology which, far from having a dependence upon ritual, actually documents important social, political and philosophical consequences of tripartism. This goes some way towards supporting Graves' intuition that "A large part of Greek myth is politico-religious history... Perseus's name should properly be spelled Pterseus, 'the destroyer'; and he...represented the patriarchal Hellenes who invaded Greece and Asia Minor early in the second millennium B.C., and challenged the power of the Triple Goddess".¹²² Graves' views offer no reflections upon the tripartite stratification of the social order, but it is at least interesting to note that one of Dumézil's followers has argued that tripartism is so deep-seated an outlook in Indo-European culture that it encourages a predisposition in the Western mind to

think in 'threes'.¹²³ Further corroboration comes from comparative mythology's finding that a form of dual kingship did in fact exist among the Indo-Europeans, uniting the two functions of warrior and husbandmen in the power of the throne, and probably revolving on a half-yearly basis.¹²⁴

If a limited amount of supporting evidence can be adduced from other studies to save at least some of the fine detail of Graves' theory from being effaced, little can be said on behalf of the mythographic work that went into The White Goddess. The work on the alphabets seems, as time goes by, to belong with the etymological and linguistic speculations of the eighteenth-century scholars we discussed in Chapter 2. The Guest translations of the Mabinogion were out of date and known to be inaccurate twenty years before Graves used them. Professor MacAlister's work on the Ogham alphabets was superseded by the magisterial study by Francis O'Rahilly two years before the publication of The White Goddess.¹²⁵ MacAlister and O'Rahilly both viewed the BLN alphabet with suspicion, and O'Rahilly eventually decided that it was a seventeenth-century forgery, a conclusion supported by most modern scholars. Graves takes an almost incredibly naive euhemerist stance in relation to the early history of Britain as revealed in the old Irish sources, and he does his case no good by repeatedly muddling Dark Age dates and personages. Contemporary views of the Taliesin riddles tend to see them as the ritual utterances of a shape-shifting shaman-figure, the Lord of the Beasts whose soul can be magically transferred from being to being, relics of a theriomorphic paganism which clung on in the fastnesses of Wales¹²⁶ into the Christian era. There are some grounds for believing that the Afallenneu verses are connected with a residual Druidism, but only through the Druid teachings on metempsychosis, and not through any secret concealed within the Ogham alphabet. One scholar goes so far as to challenge

the authenticity of the whole Taliesin corpus, dismissing the shape-shifting verse as the attempts by perverse medieval poets "to enhance the prestige of the traditional bardic order by being deliberately esoteric in style and content".¹²⁷

The major assault on Graves' thesis in The White Goddess comes, however, not from textual disputes, damaging though these be, but from the discredit that has been poured upon the whole notion of the matriarchy since it first insinuated itself into philosophical anthropology. Without matriarchy, the system which Graves has constructed, with its remarkable capacity for synthesising and organizing disparate fragments of language and myth, collapses into a broken collage of numinous, poetic, yet ultimately unintelligible motifs. Graves himself recognizes the centrality of this account of the social order to his argument when he introduces his encyclopedia of The Greek Myths with the statement:

The whole of neolithic Europe, to judge from surviving artefacts and myths, had a remarkably homogeneous system of religious ideas based on worship of the many-titled Mother-goddess, who was also known in Syria and Libya.¹²⁸

As we have seen, Frazer himself viewed this theory with scepticism, and it never really gained more than a foothold in modern anthropology. George Stanley Faber, as we noted in Chapter 2, had tried to trace the various mother goddesses of antiquity back to an archetype of the Ark, apparently recognizing an affinity in their titles and attributes. Faber's source for many of the mythographic correspondences that he found between the female deities was the brilliant but wayward mythographer Francis Wilford. In his remarkable collection of researches entitled "Essay on the Sacred Isles in the West",¹²⁹ Wilford equated a number of classical female divinities with one another, at one point pausing to notice the repeated occurrence

of whiteness in their names and associated myths. One of his chapters is entitled "SWETA DEVI: or the WHITE GODDESS", perhaps the first instance of this title in the annals of anthropological scholarship.

The theory of the matriarchy emerges fully as a minor tradition in the developing science of primitive anthropology with the works of Bachofen and Briffault. Contradicting Patrick Grant, Seymour-Smith insists that Graves was unaquainted with either author when he came to write The White Goddess,¹³⁰ though it is clear that Bachofen and Briffault brought the matriarchal hypothesis, for a time, into the mainstream of research. Bachofen's main fault was to confuse goddess-worship with matriarchy, and this error led him to believe that humanity had repressed the memory of a mother-dominated culture in its literature and religion. Curiously, Das Mutterrecht (Mother-Right)¹³¹ of 1861 argued that the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy, far from being a fall, represented the evolutionary advance of the human race. The French Marxist, Briffault, took issue with this conclusion in his The Mothers¹³² (translated 1927) because he adhered to Engel's view that the end of a mother-dominated collective coincided with the rise of both the family and private property. Briffault was less interested in the symbolic and religious functions accorded women, and more concerned with how "the great historical defeat of the feminine sex"¹³³ introduced class conflict into human society. His grasp of myth was weak (he sees the Moon as male) and he had no real understanding to offer of the meaning of religious belief in antiquity.

Matriarchy continued into the twentieth-century as an eccentric sub-tradition of the main work of speculative mythology and comparative religion. It has never really disappeared entirely as a theory and, indeed, has undergone something of a revival in the past twenty years among thinkers, especially some feminists, on the fringes of religious

enquiry. But the breakthroughs in social anthropology in the generations after Frazer proved conclusively that no evidence of a matriarchal culture or a matriarchal phase of civilization could be found. What were once regarded as matriarchal signposts are now labelled merely "matrist",¹³⁴ indicating the presence of woman-centred institutions which may be either residual or emergent, but which have not yet, in any human community, resolved themselves into a full-scale matriarchal social order.

Problematizing the concept of matriarchy raises some important questions about the ways in which a culture constructs sexuality and gender. Recent research by Simon Pembroke, Mary Lefkowitz and others has shown that when the ancients themselves talked of matriarchal societies from their remote past or in distant lands, they were using the concept pejoratively, as they did with societies ruled by slaves, as a counter-example in contrast with which they could justify - construct, even - their own forms of social organization:

If one begins by examining why and when ancient authors and artists refer to Amazons and to civilizations in which women were said to have played a dominant role, it becomes clear that to the Greeks descriptions of such societies were meant not to represent history as we think of it, but rather to offer negative examples of what would happen if women ever managed to get control. In other words, the ancient sources indicate that the rule of women never existed...¹³⁵

What is at issue here is difference, that differential relationship in which identity, be it gender-identity or social identity, is created; and it carries us straight back to the doubleness of myth. In inventing the myth of the matriarchy, the ancient authors not only condemned it as an aberration which civilized society had overcome, they also reinforced their own sense of identity in their differential relation to matriarchy. Used in this fashion, myth

does indeed immobilise the world, by reinforcing static images of difference and self-understanding. "Gynaecocracy", as Pembroke tells us the Greeks called it, "is 'women getting out of hand'".¹³⁶ Of the authentic societies in which the classical authorities claimed to have detected matriarchy. "There is no single instance in which...it can be identified as a matrilineal system".¹³⁷ Matriarchy is a way of demonizing women.

There are wider implications for Graves' theory in all of this. For if matriarchy is about difference then so might also be the single poetic theme. The act of elevating the personal muse not only defines the relationship between the poet and his beloved, it also sets the sexes in an opposition which is mutually gender-defining. Devotion to the mysteries of matriarchal power, it could be argued, traps women within yet another myth of gender construction, a male fantasy in which they are coerced into acting out certain ancient life-and-love-sustaining roles which in turn are vital to the construction of masculine identity. What purports to be a rejection of the patriarchal abuses of will, ego and authority in the name of the matriarchal principles of love, rebirth and submission to the life-restoring natural cycle, is recuperated as another, subtler form of male oppression, conditioning the female to subordinate herself to the outworking of ancient and refractory biocosmic forces.

As the historian of religions, E.O. James remarks in his study of The Cult of the Mother Goddess, a book which nowhere mentions Graves, a certain image of woman has, regardless of the non-existence of matriarchy, always exercised a peculiar fascination in the discourse of myth:

Woman with her inexplicable nature and unaccountable attributes and functions, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation,

has been a mysterious person, calling forth a numinous reaction and evaluation, permeated with religious sentiments, rendering her at once sacred and tabu.¹³⁸

The most troubling, disturbing and moving work of Robert Graves stands at this interface of sacred and tabu, forcing us to question, imploring us to exalt.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Laurence Lerner, The Uses of Nostalgia (London, 1972), p. 71.
2. Collected Poems, p. 114. Graves had first used this Biblical myth in a telling analogy, when he had affronted the officials at his local Remembrance Day service by reading aloud verse of Owen and Sassoon: "I also suggested that the men who had died, destroyed as it were by the fall of the Tower of Siloam, were not particularly virtuous or particularly wicked, but just average soldiers, and that the survivors should thank God they were alive, and do their best to avoid wars in the future." Goodbye To All That, p. 260.
3. Robert Graves, The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922-1949 (London, 1949), p. 341.
4. Robert Graves, "No More Ghosts", Collected Poems, p. 117.
5. Collected Poems, p. 121.
6. Ibid, p. 126.
7. Blake, op. cit. p. 326.
8. Collected Poems, p. 130.
9. Poggioli, op. cit. p. 214.
10. Collected Poems, p. 130.
11. A close study of the relationship between Graves and Laura Riding does not fall within the range of this study. I should state clearly that I do not consider her influence to have been particularly significant in the formation of Graves' mature mythology. Any attempt to probe the pattern of influence between two such great selfhoods becomes caught up in a tissue of biographical fallacies and the web of obfuscation both writers have woven around themselves. With Graves only recently dead, and Riding a disputatious octogenarian, it seems to me that some time will have to lapse before we can begin to penetrate the truth of their collaboration.
See Seymour-Smith, op. cit. chaps ix-xxii passim; R.P. Graves, op. cit. pp. 322-25; Day, op. cit. chaps 7-9 passim; Canary, op. cit. pp. 75-82; Kirkham, op. cit. pp. 110-14, 181-86. Kirkham seems later to have altered his views, concluding that the debt between the two writers was all one way, Graves having derived most of his ideas and much of his verse from Riding. This seems to me totally misconceived: "Robert Graves' Debt to Laura Riding", Focus on Robert Graves, no. 3 (December 1973), 33-44.
12. Robert Graves, Collected Poems 1938 (London, 1938), p. xiv.
13. Collected Poems, p. 135.
14. Robert Graves, The Golden Fleece (London, 1944), p. 124.
15. The White Goddess, p. 288.
16. The Golden Fleece, p. 125.
17. Collected Poems, p. 135. There is an interesting discussion of of this poem in Fraser, op. cit. pp. 125-26.

18. See David Foulkes, "How Do Hypnagogic Dreams Differ from REM Dreams?", in Ralph L. Woods and Herbert B. Greenhouse (eds), The New World of Dreams (New York, 1974), p. 323.

19. The years between 1929 and 1948, embracing as they do the turbulent relationship with Riding, are, from the viewpoint of criticism and biography, the most problematic of Graves' long career. No systematic study of what might be termed the 'genealogy' of The White Goddess has been essayed by either biographers or literary critics, mainly because much of the documentation remains in the custody of the Graves family, and the poet's executors. This material includes, I am led to believe, working drafts of The White Goddess, a full bibliography, and even the vast card-indexing system Graves and Gay employed in gathering data for the book.

Seymour-Smith is as inadequate on this matter as he is on Graves' creative work generally. For example, he passes over the significance of My Head! My Head! in brackets, in spite of the fact that it contains, in outline, most of Graves' views on matriarchy. He has no real intellectual grasp of The White Goddess, and appears unconcerned with tracing its roots in Graves' earlier work: see Seymour-Smith, op. cit. pp. 383-85, 395-99.

It is possible that succeeding volumes of R.P. Graves' projected three-volume biography will shed fresh light on these issues, though R.P. Graves seems still more at sea among his uncle's poetry and ideas than does Seymour-Smith. No mention is made by either biographer of Graves' early interest in The Mabinogion, or his passion for Celtic folklore.

Day makes some attempt to study the genesis of The White Goddess, but he relies much too heavily on Graves' own testimony, which others have shown to be inaccurate (see below): see Day, op. cit. pp. 156-60.

20. The White Goddess, p. 54.

21. Sidney Musgrove, The Ancestry of the White Goddess, University of Auckland, Bulletin no. 62, Series no. 11, (Auckland, 1962). Despite a lack of the material in which the biographers abound, Musgrove does make some effort to look for pre-echoes of the Goddess in Graves' earlier prose speculations. He also examines the several, often conflicting, accounts Graves has given of the origins of The White Goddess, including remarks made in the three different editions. Ultimately, however, he is forced back into trying to find the origins of the Goddess in the poetry, and here his approach becomes much weaker, because he is unduly selective, and seems interested only in poetry which employs specifically mythological motifs. See pp. 3-10, 23-27.

22. John E. Vickery, Robert Graves and the White Goddess (Nebraska, 1972). Although he begins by offering an interesting account of some of the anthropological sources upon which Graves might have drawn, Vickery's work is unnecessarily handicapped by its obsession with the direct influence of J.G. Frazer upon Graves. The evidence he gathers to support this hypothesis is sometimes circumstantial to the point of absurdity, including echoes in Graves' poetry which, Vickery claims, can be traced to obscure passages buried in the heart of The Golden Bough. That Graves does indeed owe a heavy debt to Frazer is not in dispute. But there are also important differences in outlook which Vickery overlooks. Once again, the biggest problem is a lack of solid documentary evidence to support speculative theories. See pp. 1-25, 53-92.

23. See Musgrove, op. cit. pp. 3-5.
24. Written between 1942 and 1944: Seymour-Smith, op. cit. p. 372.
25. Robert Graves, King Jesus (London, 1946). Written between 1944 and 1946: Seymour-Smith, op. cit. pp. 383-84.
26. Seymour-Smith, op. cit. pp. 287-88.
27. Ibid pp. 321-28.
28. The White Goddess was published in three, slightly different editions: 1948, 1952 and 1961. The famous subtitle appeared in all three.
29. Robert Graves, "The Old Black Cow", The Crowning Privilege (London, 1959), p. 179. The edition of The Mabinogion with which Graves was familiar was that translated by Lady Charlotte Guest (London, 1849).
30. Charlotte Guest, The Mabinogion, pp. 61-81.
31. Ibid pp. 61-81.
32. The White Goddess, pp. 304-13.
33. A lamentable fact made worse by the recent appearance of the extremely lengthy biography by R.P. Graves, where the reading of Graves' formative years is barely documented, despite the author's access to the archive of family papers. Fragments of information may be found in Seymour-Smith, op. cit. pp. 98, 119. I might also add here that Paul O'Prey's selection of Letters, op. cit. is not very illuminating either, which is a pity.
34. See above, pp. 155-56.
35. Seymour-Smith, op. cit. p. 119. In a biography which seems intent in recording its subject's every sneeze, R.P. Graves cannot find space to enter Frazer's name in the index, yet his book covers the most formative years of Graves' reading.
36. On English Poetry, pp. 54-55.
37. Ibid p. 142.
38. Robert Graves, My Head! My Head! (London, 1925).
39. Seymour-Smith, op. cit. p. 119.
40. James G. Frazer, Folklore in the Old Testament (London, 1918).
41. My Head! My Head!, p. 51.
42. James G. Frazer, The Golden Bough, Vol 6, p. 202.
43. Ibid pp. 211-12.
44. Robert Graves, "The Avengers", Whipperginny (London, 1923), p. 51.
45. Musgrove, op. cit. pp. 12-13.

46. "As It Were Poems" III. "Dear Name, how shall I call you?". First published in To Whom Else? (Majorca, 1931), p. 18. Reprinted in Poems 1930-1933 (London, 1933).
47. King Jesus, Epigraph. The quotation is from the apocryphal The Gospel according to the Egyptians, as quoted by Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, iii. It demonstrates Graves' interest in heretical Christianity and Gnosticism.
48. The Golden Fleece, p. 56.
49. Ibid, Invocation.
50. Ibid p. 8.
51. James G. Frazer, Totem and Exogamy (London, 1921). See The Golden Fleece, p. 460.
52. The Golden Fleece, p. 458.
53. Ibid pp. 26-27.
54. Ibid p. 54.
55. Ibid p. 449.
56. Ibid p. 456.
57. King Jesus, p. 355.
58. Ibid p. 355.
59. Ibid pp. 239-40.
60. Ibdi p. 199.
61. Ibid p. 199
62. Ibid p. 226.
63. Ibid pp. 214-17.
64. Ibid p. 213.
65. Ibid p. 213.
66. Ibid p. 214. Italics in text.
67. Ibid p. 220.
68. The White Goddess, p. 219.
69. Robert Graves, Letter to Lynette Roberts, 4 December 1943, in O'Prey, op. cit. p. 320.
70. Edward Davies, Celtic Researches (Cardiff, 1809).
71. O'Prey, op. cit. p. 320.

72. King Jesus, p. 193. Once again, it is very difficult to trace the origins of Graves' interest in ancient alphabets. The letter to Lynette Roberts is the best piece of evidence we yet possess.
73. Ibid p. 183.
74. The White Goddess, p. 38. Though it is not really a part of The Mabinogion, Charlotte Guest included a translation of The Romance of Taliesin in her edition of the Welsh cycle. See Guest, op. cit. pp. 263-287.
75. The White Goddess, p. 124.
76. Ibid p. 138.
77. Ibid, title of chap. xiv, p. 245.
78. Ibid p. 136.
79. Ibid p. 341.
80. Ibid p. 465.
81. Ibid p. 465.
82. Ibid p. 481.
83. Reproduced from The White Goddess, pp. 207-8.
84. Mehoke is wrong in his analysis of "The Song of Amergin" when he writes "...the BLNFS is revised to BLFSN in order to promote Odin to a month consonant with spring and out of winter, which Bran returns to in this revision..." Bran-Fearn is transferred to the month station of Feb 18 - Mar 17 in the revised alphabet, which can hardly be described as winter. Similarly, Odin-Nion originally occupied the Feb 18 - Mar 17 station, and his shift to the station Apr 15 - May 12 cannot plausibly be regarded as a move from winter to spring. The point is that in the revised, patriarchal alphabet the seasonal associations have been altered to correspond to the life-cycle of a divinity no longer regarded as subject to the natural rhythms of the seasons. See Mehoke, op. cit. pp. 71, 74-80.
85. The White Goddess, p. 209.
86. Ibid p. 216.
87. Ibid p. 213.
88. Ibid p. 245.
89. Ibid p. 107.
90. Ibid p. 105.
91. Ibid p. 103.
92. Ibid p. 103. Recent archaeological evidence, uncovered since Graves' work, confirms the association of New Grange with 'Spiral' or 'Glass' Castle. It appears that the tomb was at one point covered in quartz crystals which made it glitter "like the substance to which

the name glass was given." See Michael Senior, Myths of Britain (Thetford, 1979), p. 180.

93. The White Goddess, p. 103.

94. Ibid p. 111.

95. Ibid p. 111.

96. Ibid p. 386.

97. Ibid p. 70.

98. Ibid p. 67.

99. Ibid p. 67.

100. Ibid p. 434.

101. Ibid p. 21. Graves later introduced a selection of Lewis' poems: See, Jeremy Hooker and Gweno Lewis (eds), Selected Poems of Alun Lewis (London, 1981), pp. 5-6.

102. Robert Graves, Oxford Addresses on Poetry (London, 1962), p. 60.

103. Ibid p. 61.

104. Ibid p. 62.

105. Ibid pp. 62-63.

106. The White Goddess, p. 148.

107. Ibid p. 442.

108. Ibid p. 462.

109. Ibid p. 145.

110. Ibid p. 447.

111. Ibid p. 490.

112. Ibid p. 444.

113. Ibid p. 448. This is Graves' poetic stance at its most shamanistic, locating the origin of poetic utterance in a primal scene where the registering consciousness blends the roles of priest, victim and magician. Graves develops a wholesale identification of inspiration with a mythic scenario infused with violence and an almost atavistic primitivism, completely hostile to the delicate fabric of civilization and reason. Nowhere are his roots in shamanism and the Orphic myth of the magical soul more clearly exposed.

The common origins of poetry and religion in the higher strains of Indo-European shamanism are explored in fascinating detail by the anthropologist Weston La Barre, The Ghost Dance: Origins of Religion (London, 1972). See, in particular, his chapters, "Shamans and Societies", pp. 299-327, and "Charisma and Mana", pp. 357-87. The latter contains the best examination of the crucially important concept of mana, and its relation to cultural crisis, I have yet found.

114. Vickery, op. cit. passim.
115. Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1960), Vol 1, p. 12.
116. Harrison, Prologomena, pp. 187-97.
117. See above, p. 92.
118. The White Goddess, p. 201n. Graves also draws upon Murray for his theories about the Robin Hood cultus and myth: See pp. 395-98, 407.
119. See especially C. L'Estrange Ewen, Witchcraft and Demonianism (London, 1929), pp. 59-60; Keith Thomas, op. cit. pp. 614-15.
120. René Girard (trans. Patrick Gregory), Violence and the Sacred (London, 1977), pp. 39-68.
121. This is a vast area - probably the fastest-growing in the contemporary study of myth. See, especially, Georges Dumézil (trans. Philip Krapp), Archaic Roman Religion (Chicago, 1970); Dumézil (trans. Alf Hiltebeitel), The Destiny of the Warrior (Chicago, 1970); C. Scott Littleton, The New Comparative Mythology: an anthropological assessment of the theories of Georges Dumézil, 2nd ed (Berkeley, 1973), pp. 100-40; Gerald James Larson (ed), Myth in Indo-European Antiquity (Berkeley, 1974); R.L. Gordon (ed), Myth, Religion and Society (Cambridge, 1981).
122. The Greek Myths, Vol 1, p. 17.
123. J. Brough, "The Tripartite Ideology of the Indo-Europeans: An Experiment in Method", Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, XXII (1959), 69-85.
124. Donald J. Ward, "The Separate Functions of the Indo-European Divine Twins", in Jaan Puhvel (ed), Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans (Berkeley, 1970), pp. 193-202.
125. Thomas F. O'Rahilly, Early Irish History and Mythology (Dublin, 1946), pp. 141ff.
126. See Nikolai Tolstoy, The Quest For Merlin (London, 1985), pp.26,32.
127. Patrick Sims-Williams, "The Evidence for vernacular Irish literary influence on early mediaeval Welsh literature", in Dorothy Whitelock et al. (ed), Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge, 1982), p. 243.
128. The Greek Myths, Vol 1, p. 13.
129. Capt. Francis Wilford, "An Essay on the Sacred Isles in the West", Asiatick Researches, Vol 1 (London, 1812), pp. 130ff.
130. Seymour-Smith, op. cit. p. 387. Seymour-Smith is expressing disagreement with Patrick Grant, "The Dark Side Of The Moon: Robert Graves As Mythographer", Malahat Review, no. 35 (July, 1975), 143-65. The title is something of a misnomer, as Grant makes no attempt to assess the mythographical significance of Graves' theories, and does not seem au fait with contemporary thinking in these areas. He is more concerned with analysing Graves' techniques as a creative

reinterpreter of myths.

131. Johann J. Bachofen (trans. R. Michaelson), Myth, Religion and Mother Right, Bollingen Series no. 84 (New Jersey, 1967).

132. Robert Briffault (trans. Kelsey et al.), The Mothers: a study of the origins of sentiments and institutions, 3 vols. (London, 1927).

133. Ibid, Vol 1, p. 19.

134. Anthony Stevens, Archetype: a natural history of the self (London, 1982), p. 124.

Attempts to revive the theme of the matriarchy seem endemic to feminism, especially what has come to be known as second-wave feminism - no longer concerned with parity of the sexes, but with a reassertion of an essentialist feminine identity untrammelled by patriarchal notions of emancipation. Whatever its other virtues, this strain of feminist thought seems staggeringly blind to the findings of (patriarchal?) scholarship, repeatedly insisting on the authenticity of a primordial matriarchal Golden Age. Aside from the quasi-pagan fringe, respected scholars who have revived this old hypothesis include Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York, 1976), who writes of what she calls "gynocentric" institutions in primitive times, sharing "certain kinds of woman-centred beliefs and woman-centred social organization...In the earliest artifacts we know, we encounter the female as Primal Power." (p.93). A massive restatement of the thesis appears in Marilyn French, Beyond Power: Women, Men and Morals (London, 1985). French charts what she terms "The Fall" from matriarchy into patriarchy, marshalling huge quantities of outdated and dubious evidence: pp. 25-65.

For a useful summary of the field, see Hester Eisenstein, Contemporary Feminist Thought (London, 1984), pp. 79-97.

135. Mary R. Lefkowitz, "Princess Ida, the Amazons and a women's college curriculum", in Times Literary Supplement, November 27 1981, 1400. See also her Women In Greek Myth (London, 1986), pp. 20-22.

136. Simon Pembroke, "Women in Charge: the function of alternatives in early Greek tradition and the ancient idea of matriarchy", The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute 30 (1967) p. 30

137. Ibid p. 34.

Further nails in the coffin of matriarchy may be found in J. Bamberger, "The myth of matriarchy", in M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds), Women, Culture and Society (Stanford, 1973), pp. 263-80; P. Vidal-Naquet, "Slavery and the Rule of Women in tradition, myth and utopia", in R.L. Gordon, op. cit. pp. 187-201.

138. E.O. James, The Cult of the Mother Goddess (London, 1959), p. 229.

Chapter 5: The Theme Defended: The Later Poems and Criticism

The Magical Poems

The occult or magical life, the life lived according to a reality behind the veil of appearance, where categories of time and space are perceived as reflexes of human consciousness, has undergone subtle transformations in the twentieth-century. Despised on one side by the positivistic spirit of the age and its enthronement of the scientific method, trivialized on the other by the pressures of a consumer society fearful of its own desacralized condition, the sense of "mysterious wisdom won by toil"¹ has been pushed beyond the margins of mainstream cultural discourse.

The recovery of myth in the form of, for example, Eliot's mythical method has frequently relied upon the mediation of philosophical anthropology, which presents mythical awareness as a species of bricolage by which the elite consciousness of the writer reconstitutes a lost idea of order from fragments of disused belief-systems. In the case of Robert Graves, however, the highly tendentious and selectively-constructed anthropology is employed purely as a means of forwarding a much more deep-seated form of awareness, felt to be closely bound up with the nature of poetry itself, and addressed to non-rational areas of consciousness which unite man with a primordial past, with the organic unity of nature, and with a vision of woman as the Centre from which life's joys and sufferings derive their meaning.

Although it has strong and powerful bonds with the cultural crisis of the twentieth-century, some of which we have already explored, and some of which will become apparent as this study progresses, Graves' dedication to myth is distinguished from Eliot's project by its commitment to the magical account of man's nature which we identified in Chapter 2 as one aspect of the mythical experience.

What I have called the essential doubleness of myth, its capacity to at once conserve and subvert, to circumscribe and set free, is not lost by this commitment, but it is tilted decisively in favour of a dissentient response to the orthodoxy generated by reason and the workings of industrial society. I suggested in Chapter 4 that the single poetic theme and its accompanying theory of the matriarchy betrayed an ambivalence towards gender-construction which could be used to confine women to biologically-determined roles as assuredly as any patriarchal convention. But this tendency must be set against impulses within the monomyth which release radically alternative and vitalizing forces into Graves' poetry and the critique of modern life to which it gives rise.

To those who believe in the magical definition of man's soul, every human being is a child of the universe, a creature of the stars and the moon and the night, alien to the diurnal round, to reason, and to the patterns of law and custom which reason and patriarchy impose upon existence. This produces an explanation of human nature and sexual relationships inimical to the various functional or socially deterministic creeds which have emerged in the latter stages of industrial civilization. In Graves' aesthetic, the return to myth is not a restoration of order, or the reassertion of older value-systems. It is a statement, fundamentally, of the sovereignty of the private self and the private self's network of relationships. It represents a turning-away from orthodoxy and orthodox definitions of happiness, in a gesture which is itself a subversive act, towards an inner realm of self-validating experience in communion with deep centres of affective awareness remote from the stultifying demands of modernity. "Then reckon time by what you are or do", Graves advises his daughter Lucia, "Not by the epochs of the war they spread"². War is the most outrageous violation practised upon this magical, private

self by a world long-since divorced from the life-giving reserves of nature, woman and the psyche. As civilization careers towards ruin, throwing up counterfeit versions of humanity as it goes, poetry and poetic love become forms of resistance to the depredations of banalistic forces, guarding and perpetuating the secret of man's original destiny, of the endlessly-repeated cycle of joy and pain, death and rebirth, participation in which should be the sufficient ground of our being.

The single poetic theme informs the great volume of love lyrics which is Graves' major contribution to English poetry. The manifold motifs of the White Goddess appear like radiant symbols in these poems, uniting the individual experience of erotic love to the larger drama of the poet's dealings with the Muse. But it is rare for them to obtrude into the verse because in many ways they are supererogatory. Every authentic love story, according to Graves, exhibits the salient features of the single poetic theme, even those which unfold in contexts where the symbolism has lost some of its potency. Mythology, for Graves, does not mean simply spangling poetry with abstruse symbols and polyglot tags. It is a form of knowledge in its own right, by which the mind makes sense of the vicissitudes of love by connecting them to an archaic ritual tradition which releases their inherent metaphysical possibilities. Myth, for Graves, is not an instrument to be used heuristically as a means of shadowing forth order out of chaos. It is a completely alternative reality, and an alternative account of what it is to be human, involving a rejection of historically-conditioned ideas of order in the name of an atavistic reality perceived to be continually breaking in on the mundane.

These are the motives which drove Graves to assume, in a handful of works he termed "Magical Poems",³ the mantle of the ancient bard, expounding in the expansive rhetoric of the mythopoeic mode the lore

and learning of the White Goddess. These poems usually take the form of a dramatic monologue or a ritual dialogue. In the former, a silent interlocutor, who is almost always interchangeable with the reader, receives instruction in the doctrines of the single poetic theme and is brought close to that interface of joy and terror where the goddess is felt to be supremely present. In the latter, a pair of lovers, only half aware of the forces which possess them, act out some dramatic moment of decision in their relationship, which takes the form of a kind of mystery play uniting their passing experience to the eternal cycle of the single poetic theme.

At the outset of "To Juan at the Winter Solstice"⁴ the interlocutor is apprised of the same knowledge that Mary the Hairdresser had defiantly asserted in the face of Jesus' hostility to the works of the female:

There is one story and one story only
That will prove worth your telling,
Whether as learned bard or gifted child;
To it all lines or lesser gauds belong
That startle with their shining
Such common stories as they stray into.

The address to Juan repeats the basic iconotropic procedure with which Mary tried unsuccessfully to defend the story contained in the stone tablets. But Juan is a far more passive interlocutor than was Jesus, and contests neither the version of the narrative he is offered, nor the means by which the poet sets forth the story primarily as text. We observed in Chapter 4 that the theories in The White Goddess arose out of the poet's struggle with a vast interlocking palimpsest of texts, and texts within texts, in which were encoded secret alphabets and cryptographic renderings of divine names. This obsession with texts is reflected in the first stanza's repeated reference to the single poetic theme as story, a huge absorbing

narrative which draws "all lines or lesser gauds" into the orbit of its authority, and extends its influence to "Such common stories" by an extensive system of echo and allusion which transforms otherwise foreign material into versions of itself.

In a sense, this version of the monomyth takes us back to Müller's complaint that mythology is a disease of language. Just as Müller, and earlier exponents of the grand theory, sought to reduce all myths to the story of the sun's progress through the heavens, so there is an authoritarian tendency in the single poetic theme which seeks hegemony over "lesser gauds" and "common stories" by stamping them with the imprint of the monomyth. Graves vividly conveys the idea of such an imprint in the notion of a "shining" text. The single poetic theme is radiant with the numinous glow of presence, that more authentic presence of the goddess, which runs like a thread through the "common stories" it happens to "stray into", and 'startles' their mediocrity with the light of the myth, seizing the reader's attention by the inclusion of material which points back to the one story. These signs of the Goddess, which subordinate all lesser texts to the authority of the Theme, can be discerned by the "learned bard", who has penetrated her secrets and knows her name, or the "gifted child", like the precocious Taliesin, who could set forth her mysteries in riddling style to the consternation of his rivals.

The first stanza of "To Juan" highlights the textual priority of the single poetic theme, and emphasizes its narrative form, before the registering bardic intelligence in the poem goes on to itemize for Juan the diversity of elements which may be assumed into its scope. The series of rhetorical questions reverberate with a ritual significance conveyed primarily in the rich texture of motifs which binds the stanza together: the tree-alphabet, the "strange beasts", the "birds that croak at you the Triple will", signs of a natural

order which is also instinct with the symbolism and the outworkings of the one story. The question technique allows the poet to leap from element to element as he directs the attention of his interlocutor to the extent of the story's influence, which corresponds precisely to the dominion of the "Triple will".

The transition in the fourth question, from the natural to the celestial, focuses Juan's attention upon the fate of the sacred king, whose cycle of death and rebirth begins at "the Boreal Crown,/Prison of all true kings that ever reigned". The elevation of the interlocutor's gaze from earth to heaven allows the poet to depart momentarily from the interrogative style in order to contemplate and make apparent to Juan the pageant of the beloved victim's eternally-recurring fate:

Water to Water, ark again to ark,
From woman back to woman:
So each new victim treads unfalteringly
The never altered circuit of his fate,
Bringing twelve peers as witness
Both to his starry rise and starry fall.

The effect of the language in this stanza is to create the impression of ceremony. The arrangement of prepositions and adverbs, "to...to...", "From...back to", and the pattern of repetition, "Water...water...ark...ark/...woman...woman", adumbrates the oscillating rhythm of the fate of the sacred king, and, indeed, the libration of life itself from birth to death. In the story of "each new victim" the transience of the flesh, with which all life is burdened, is dignified by becoming part of a natural and supernatural cycle.

The close patterning of the syllables in the description of his progress through the cycle reiterates the sense of a movement which is at once freely embraced and inescapable. The constituent phonemes of the last word of the third line, "unfalteringly", indicating the

beloved victim's courage and purposefulness, are distributed throughout the words in the next line. Thus "uNFALTERingly" reverberates behind the language of "NevER ALTERed cIRcuIT of his FATe", which is intended to suggest the ineluctable, eternally-recurring quality of the beloved victim's sacrifice. The echo-rhyming colon "ALTER", and the repetition of the consonantal phonemes "l", "t", and the labiodental fricatives "f" and "v", bind this notion of a freely-embraced, positively affirmed role to the equally clear sense of an inescapable, endlessly-repeated destiny; a ritual through which each incarnation of the sacred king ratifies the eternal, seasonal pattern. This tension between free will and determinism is another of the paradoxes of myth, and inheres in the stanza's particular aggregate of sound. *The repetition of "starry" in the final line's description of the victim's "rise and... fall" carries Juan's gaze from the celestial heights, where the king's fate is written in cosmic, zodiacal figures, back to the earth where his fullest encounter with the Goddess occurs. Within the cycle of the sacred king's story, woman is discerned, first, as womb and tomb, the "ark" in which the divine child is borne across the waters of life, and the "ark" to which his remains are consigned after his sacrificial death to await rebirth. The beloved victim's true reward lies in the vision of woman he achieves through the grace of erotic love, the central experience of the single poetic theme:*

Or is it of the Virgin's silver beauty,
All fish below the thighs?
She in her left hand bears a leafy quince...

Opening the stanza with the conjunction "Or", Graves takes his interlocutor back to the series of ritual questions that was temporarily interrupted by the meditation in stanza three. The downward trajectory of Juan's gaze continues its descent to the icon of the Goddess-as-nymph, a tableau of Venus Pandemos, the ambivalence of

whose sexual allure is vividly conveyed in her mythic trappings. "Silver beauty" succeeds only briefly in suggesting lunar remoteness before its association with "All fish below the thighs" conjures up the image of the mermaid, typically representative of sexual temptation and perfidy. In this curiously bestial image, Juan's attention is momentarily focused upon the conjunction of fear and loathing which habitually menaces the Gravesian ideal of sexual love. The woman who appears as mermaid "below the thighs" is freighted through transference with Graves' fear of the flesh, and appears as an insatiable female extending to her potential lover the "leafy quince" or wild apple which signifies the presence of death in her sexual embrace. The equation of sex and death, a correspondence with deep roots in Graves' poetry, is openly admitted into the stanza, and stylizes the Goddess in the mannered pose of the sexual temptress: "When with her right she crooks a finger, smiling,/How may the King hold back?" It is part of the victim's task to affirm the isomorphic unity of sex and death, in a gesture of acceptance which effectively sublimates the fear of the flesh by making of the body a sacrificial offering to the Goddess: "Royally then he barter life for love". His royalty, a word which is burdened in Graves' usage with its full etymological association with 'real' and 'reality',⁵ consists in this self-renunciation by which love transcends the ego's fear of its own finitude. To participate in the fullness of erotic love means the sacrifice of life to the cycles over which woman presides. This dominant vision of the Goddess is the axis upon which "To Juan" turns. Three verses lead up to her revelation as the Goddess of Love, and three verses lead away from it. The ritual questions in the fourth stanza further initiate Juan into the system of motifs which revolves around the central image. Here he is invited to contemplate the actions by which the hero-victim is destroyed in his service

to the Goddess, surrendering his life in return for the love he has shared. His antagonist, in this version of the myth, is the "undying snake", Ophion, "Into whose chops with naked sword he springs", to take up the combat he knows he cannot win yet which confirms him as the hero who 'dares', 'takes upon himself' and 'endures'. The reward for his self-surrender to the Goddess is "To be spewed up beside her scalloped shore", reborn into the cycle and prepared to face the further trials and joys she will dispense.

Beyond the mysterious, cyclic pageant of the sacred king's "never altered circuit", to which the bard's ritual questions have addressed themselves, Juan is brought back to the mythical moment in which he and the poet contemplate the fully visible pattern of the single poetic theme: the winter solstice:

Much snow is falling, winds roar hollowly,
The owl hoots from the elder,
Fear in your heart cries to the loving-cup:
Sorrow to sorrow as the sparks fly upward.
The log groans and confesses:
There is one story and one story only.

Juan's instruction is given on that special day which stands outside the calendar-alphabet; the day of the secret of the dolmen arch which is both tomb and womb, the death-day of the elder, of Ruis, the last letter; when the divine child whose name is encoded in the vowel-sequence is secretly reborn to the dismay of his rival, the Spirit of the Waning Year. This is the sun-child who heralds the return of the light and with whom the Muse-poet must identify, and it is through his dispensation that Juan is instructed.

The winter solstice is the day which stands, figuratively, outside time. The poem, like the myth of which it is a celebration, broods over cycles and the turning, revolving sequence of stations through which the one story is told and retold. Only at the winter solstice,

the intercalated instant which does not belong to the eternally-recurring cycle, can poet and initiate find the space in which to ponder the mysterious ceremony unfolding all around them. Juan is brought to the heart of Graves' winter vision, where all nature radiates the presence of the Goddess and where all the elements of the symbolic landscape are marshalled to the requirements of the single poetic theme. Snow falls, blanketing the landscape in the whiteness which, as we have noted before, signifies that curious ambivalence by which the Goddess is everything and nothing, omnipresent yet indistinguishable from the natural forms which are covered by her informing influence, and which only the senses of the poet are trained to interpret. Her sacred bird, the owl of wisdom, hoots from the death-tree, announcing the demise of the Spirit of the Waning Year.

The combination of elements provokes in those alert to its significance the dread of love's dark fulfilment, because to love woman as she is revealed in the mythology of the winter solstice is to affirm the cruel death which awaits her victims: "Fear in your heart cries to the loving-cup". In the midst of his fulfilment, the beloved victim confronts the reality of his own death, which is the necessary sacrifice of the ego that the caprice at the heart of love will require. The joy of love, in Graves' monomyth, is purchased by recognition of its proximity to suffering, the depth of which is indicated by the allusion to Job's insight into the pain which menaces all existence: "Sorrow to sorrow as the sparks fly upward"⁶. The initiate into the mysteries of the White Goddess embraces also the sorrow which shadows love, in the shape of its losses and betrayals, its antipathy towards the mutinous demands of the will, and its final, inevitable confrontation with death. The Yule log, "cut from the sacred oak"⁷, whose "sparks fly upward", contains the imprisoned spirit of the New Year god, the divine child, who is set free by the flames to seek out

and slay his tanist, the Spirit of the Waning Year, and return to the cycle of his dealings with the Goddess. The "groans" of the log can be heard as birth-pangs of the reborn god, or the death-throes of his rival struggling to contain the neonate soul. But the real significance of the Yule-log's burning is to be heard in the single truth that it inevitably "confesses": "There is one story and one story only"; and with the release of the year-god's soul the narrative to which all the protagonists are bound can begin again its slow turning "Below the Boreal crown".

Juan is carried beyond the winter vision of the single poetic theme in the poem's final stanza. The high rhetoric of the bardic imperatives and ritual questions is modulated into a lower, injunctive tone; the pattern of repetition, "Dwell on...dwell on...", "Her brow", "Her sea-grey eyes", producing a liturgical effect which draws together poet, interlocutor and reader in a moment of contemplation. Beyond the cruelty and intensity of her erotic embrace, Juan is urged to hold before him the image of the Goddess' benign tranquillity, "her graciousness", "her smiling". The period of crisis has passed, and with the recognition that there is one story and one story only, Juan has restored to him the static image of the Goddess-as-nymph, in whose demeanour innocence and ferocity combine: "Her brow was creamy as the crested wave,/Her sea-grey eyes were wild". Acceptance of the conditions of the single poetic theme affords the poet his sublime vision of Venus untroubled by the fear of sexuality, which has been overcome by his free assent to the suffering which love of the Goddess entails. The icon made visible in the final stanza is not of the perfidious mermaid, but rather of Aphrodite rising from the waves, the cluster of similes and adjectives suggesting the beauty and remoteness of the sea across which the quester speeds towards the morning star of Venus Urania.

The bard's final admonition to Juan is one which is a familiar feature of the mythopoeic poems and takes us back to the experience of martial combat which played such a crucial part in predisposing Graves' imagination to the fertile language of myth. It is "Do not forget", and restates not only the poet's requirement to hold fast to the one story, but also the centrality of memory in Graves' aesthetic as a means of overcoming the self's bondage to time. In Goodbye To All That, Graves records how, at his first Memorial Service, he "scandalized" his audience by reading "some of the more painful poems by Sassoon and Wilfred Owen about men dying from gas poisoning... I also suggested...that the survivors should thank God they were alive, and do their best to avoid wars in the future."⁸ Poetry is used to bring to life a lost and painful past and make it real for a forgetful present. In The White Goddess, the outlines of this memory myth receive a sharper definition through the rhetorical tropes Graves calls prolepsis and analepsis:

In fact, it is not too much to say that all... poetical compositions are the result of proleptic thought - the anticipation, by means of a suspension of time, of a result which 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.⁹

It is this double-trope which vitiates the illusory linearity of narrative - an idea for which Graves claims backing in the thought of J.W. Dunne¹⁰ - and releases poetic consciousness from bondage to the past or the future: "This explains why the first Muse of the Greek triad was named Mnemosyne, 'Memory': one can have memory of the future as well as the past!"¹¹ The poet transcends time by invoking a myth of eternal return in which the ritual actions celebrated in "To Juan at the Winter Solstice", by their endless repetition, constitute a re-establishment of mythical time. Memory becomes the

key term, "Do not forget", the key instruction, because, as Eric Neumann writes:

The mythological theory of foreknowledge also explains the view that all knowing is "memory". Man's task in the world is to remember with his conscious mind what was knowledge before the advent of consciousness.¹²

A view lent further credence by C. Kerenyi's insight that "...the teller of myths steps back into primordiality in order to tell us what "originally was""¹³ Juan and his instructor stand at a privileged moment which is, in a sense, outside ordinary time, a mythical moment, a turning-point, coextensive with the primal scene, where the sun-child emerges to murder his rival. The single poetic theme rests upon a mythical event, a ceremony, located in a remote 'primordiality' consistent with the deepest recesses of the psyche where the one story forever recurs unconditioned by the accidents of time and space. All that is required of the initiated, Juan is informed, is that they learn to recognize the "shining" motifs of the theme which inhere in nature and the cycle of the seasons, and to hold in their memory the mythical foreknowledge of the one story that informs all authentic relationships and the imprint of which can be traced in the various forms of nature's death and rebirth. When he sees the mysterious "flowers" of autumn, or "ivy time" - the mistletoe used to slay Balder; or the eglantine which sprouts from the elder, the tree of Crucifixion; or the anemones which "The great boar trampled down" as it charged towards Adonis - Juan is enjoined to call to mind the image of the Goddess, in whose ominous gaze there is "nothing promised that is not performed". Freedom from fear removes the terror from existence by shunting guilt and anxiety off into a mythical event entirely outwith history and sealed off from the influence of human intention. Ultimately, Juan is instructed only to acquiesce.

Graves' fullest mythopoeic rendering of the Muse occurs in the poem which appears as a dedicatory epigraph to his "historical grammar of poetic myth" and which takes its title from the inspiration of all his work: "The White Goddess".¹⁴ It is a dramatic monologue spoken by a pilgrim-character gone in search of the Goddess, and its most immediately striking feature is its identification of myth with quest:

All saints revile her, and all sober men
Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean -
In scorn of which we sailed to find her.

The pilgrim figure addresses the reader in a disaffected tone stamped by Graves' alienation from his culture and its enthronement of reason, patriarchy and the circumscribing power of the "golden mean", the debilitating forces which drove him into the exile of his imaginary pastoral. The dramatisation of this process of escape and pursuit is also indebted, it seems, to another version of the Muse-quest with which Graves associated the genesis of The White Goddess: namely the voyage of the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece, who may be the "we" to whom the speaker adverts throughout the poem. The sea voyage of the Argonauts, which Graves recorded faithfully in The Golden Fleece, took the Minyans upon a quest to recover one of the Goddess' ancient emblems, and led to their initiation into her mysteries. The speaker of the monologue may be equated with either Jason or Orpheus, the two members of the crew who, in Graves' story, are fully apprised of the significance of the fleece to the cult of the White Goddess. The identification with Orpheus suggests itself more insistently because, as we shall see in the final chapter of this study, Graves' involvement with the Orpheus myth grows more pronounced as his career progresses. The magical poet who intoned the lyric "She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep" is an appropriate spokesman for the band of questers whose journey takes them to the

heart of the Goddess's secrets, "Whom we desired above all things to know."

However, the speaker balances this thirst for knowledge of "her", to whom he refers repeatedly throughout the first verse, against a metaphor which strongly suggests the Goddess's affinity with illusion and the products of disordered consciousness: "Sister of the mirage and the echo". The "distant regions likeliest to hold her", he seems to imply, may be the remote areas of the mind itself, confronting an image of nature inadequate to its imaginative longings. The "heroic way" of the questers is achieved as much by the "headstrong" courage of their decision "not to stay" as it is by the goal of their endeavour. Throughout the second verse of the poem, the Goddess impinges upon the awareness of both quester and reader more by her absence than by her presence:

Seeking her out at the volcano's head,
Among pack ice, or where the track had faded
Beyond the cavern of the seven sleepers.

In extremities of heat, cold and geographical remoteness, the voyagers find only a trace of the deity in whose name they journey, an after-image which comes closest to material or spiritual reality in the familiar winter terrain of Graves' symbolic landscapes. The "pack ice...where the track had faded" recalls the blanketed ground in "Like Snow", where surest evidence of the female presence lay in the snow which held "the histories of the night/In yet unmelted tracks". The quester who seeks out the mysteries of the Goddess must be sustained only by traces of a long-departed or "faded" presence which clings numinously to the sites with which she is associated, but which will not yield a fully incarnate form with which the seeker can properly communicate.

In this verse, Graves creates an abiding image of the nympholeptic

quester who voyages in search of an endlessly-deferred vision of the eternal feminine, a vision which has left only a residual after-glow or "track" in the holy sites once, in some mythical past, devoted to her worship. Graves comes close to the sceptical idealism evident in the only prose passage in which he has broached the issue of the Goddess' ontological status:

Whether God is a metaphor or a fact cannot be reasonably argued; let us likewise be discreet on the subject of the Goddess. All we can know for sure is that the Ten Commandments, said to have been promulgated by Moses in the name of a Solar God, still carry religious force for those hereditarily prone to accept them...¹⁵

This same kind of evasion characterizes the rhetoric of the speaker in "The White Goddess". Even his inspiring visual evocation of the Goddess is essentially a wish-fantasy, an eidolon rather than a manifestation of the deity to her devotee:

Whose broad high brow was white as any leper's,
Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips,
With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips

The Orpheus-figure sets this icon before himself and his fellow questers as an image of the goal to which their search aspires. It is another version of the Goddess-as-nymph, as much a product of the quester's fevered imagination as an objective truth inspiring the voyage. It remains totally faithful to the cross-currents of ambivalent feeling which the image of the Goddess evokes in even her most resolute acolytes.

This time the face of the nymph is impassive, unsoftened by "graciousness" or "smiling", the worshipper's anxious scrutiny seeking out similes to express the contradictory emotions to which it gives rise. The whiteness of the Goddess is unambiguously represented in this particular tableau as the whiteness of leprosy, a comparison which

effectively empties the colour of its associations with goodness and the bright light of her benign presence. White, in Graves' colour symbolism, is irreversibly severed from its links with goodness, especially moral goodness, because the pattern of the Goddess' dealings with her lovers transcends familiar categories of good and evil. We might also add that this whiteness is the whiteness of snow, of pack ice, where the Goddess's existence is felt only as a continually-fading trace, and which, reappearing in the translucent pallor of her flesh, vexes her worshippers once again with the possibility that she is nothing more than a spectre of their own imaginings, a phantom. The allusion to the disease by which she inflicts death upon her lover and foe alike, is reinforced in the allure of her "rowan-berry lips". Rowan, or Mountain Ash, is the tree sacred to the Goddess as Mother. But the berries are mortally poisonous and figure in several myths about the slaying of the sacred king. There is no compromise in the speaker's portrait of the Goddess. It expresses all the beauty and terror of her Triple Will, the coincidence of love and death, yet it continues to command a fatal fascination for the quester who knows full well that her embrace means suffering, betrayal and extinction.

In the final stanza the speaker represses any doubts he has as to the authenticity of his vision by recalling another, less ambivalent aspect of her divinity which animates nature in the season of renewal:

Green sap of Spring in the young wood a-stir
Will celebrate the Mountain mother,
And every song-bird shout awhile for her...

The life-renewing forces of spring transform nature into a ready vehicle of the Goddess' presence, a channel in whose multifarious activities the intelligence of the poet can interpret the workings of the maternal principle organizing the pastoral vista around her

own energy.

However, the toils of their quest to recover a vision of the White Goddess carry the speaker and his comrades to the winter landscape where her existence as disclosed in the lineaments of nature becomes problematic, suggesting an uncertainty residing at the very heart of the single poetic theme. This calls upon a huge exertion of the poet's vatic powers to resolve the tracks, traces and echoes into a fully-perceived reality:

But we are gifted, even in November
Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense
Of her nakedly-worn magnificence
We forget cruelty and past betrayal,
Heedless of where the next bright bolt may fall.

Again and again, it is in the winter landscape that the plenitude of the Goddess impinges most directly upon the consciousness of the poet, despite the paucity of signifying emblems. The "huge...sense/ Of her nakedly-worn magnificence" floods the poet's awareness more profusely when nature seems devoid of those activities which serve as analogies for her dealings with the beloved. The poet is thrown back upon the power of his own desire which, he earlier admitted, served to stress the Goddess' affinity with "the mirage and echo" that erupt out of a disturbed imagination. The same ambivalence is implicit in the oxymoron "nakedly-worn" which suggests that the barrenness of winter delivers an unmediated "sense" of the Goddess' "magnificence", freed from dependence upon the registering emblems of nature. The heightened awareness of the poet requires no reciprocation from nature when it is addressed by this pantheistic manifestation of the Goddess, a theophany which imparts sufficient evidence of her existence to release him from memories of "cruelty and past betrayal" and set him again, with renewed conviction, on the perhaps never-to-be-completed quest. Submission to the will of the Goddess

means that at each turn of the cycle the burden of the past is shed, in the form of the memory of particular cruelties and betrayals. All that is carried forward into the future is the certainty of fulfilment through participation in her love.

Another, clearer apparition of the White Goddess is disclosed in the poetic fragment from this same phase of Graves' career, "The Song of Blodeuwedd".¹⁶ This is one of the texts culled by Graves from the intertextual melange of the "Battle of the Trees". It is the deliberately scrambled monologue of one of the main protagonists in the Romance of Math, the Son of Mathonwy, the Welsh folktale that Graves takes to be one of the purest mythological expressions of the single poetic theme. Blodeuwedd, whose name means 'Flower Face', is an aspect of the Goddess as the nymph-betrayer, who loves and then spurns the Sun-hero Llew in favour of his rival Gronw. Gronw then murders Llew only to be himself slain when Llew is reborn.

In keeping with the arcane, magical quality of the text itself, Blodeuwedd's monologue introduces a figure whose non-human origins are steeped in mystery and sorcery:

Not of father nor of mother
Was my blood, was my body.
I was spellbound by Gwydion,
Prime enchanter of the Britons...

The thematic variation, placing adjunct and complement before the subject, "my", delays the disclosure of Blodeuwedd's supernatural origins until the parataxis of "father...mother", "blood...body", and the pattern of the trochaic metre, have imparted an incantatory rhythm to her monologue. This rhythm cooperates with the plurisignative qualities of the verb "spellbound", which embraces the meanings 'created by a spell', 'placed under a spell', and 'fascinated'. Each of these possibilities is realised by the incantatory arrangement of the language, and each of them sustained by the further disclosure of

Gwydion's powers: "When he formed me from nine blossoms,/Nine buds of various kind:".

The colon after "kind" marks an important pause in the structure of the poem. The trochaic metre is dramatically foreshortened in the next line, and a series of end-stopped rhymes emerges to carry the sound of "kind" into the heart of the poem: "intertwined", "kind", "combined". The effect of these rhythmic and rhyming changes gradually developing in the poem is to arrest the flow of Blodeuwedd's self-revelation. The sense of rapid forward movement conveyed by the trochaic metre is adjusted to conform with the next stage of Blodeuwedd's account of her origins. The long list of flowers, the sevenfold repetition of the magical number "Nine", and the recurrence of the preposition "From" at the start of every third line, are devices which conspire to re-enact figuratively the spell by which she was created "from nine blossoms". The effect of the piling-up of flower-names, held together by the recurring preposition, is cumulative, drawing attention to the non-human elements from which Blodeuwedd is composed and stressing her close bonds with a natural realm foreign to human intention. Little or nothing of Blodeuwedd's personality is displayed by this process. She appears, in fact, to lack the outline of a personality, the hypnotic pattern of her self-disclosure imitating the spell by which Gwydion created her and imprisoning her within a trance-like state which falls short of full human identity and, instead, recalls the more familiar meaning of "spellbound". The ritual chant which ends the poem, compressed by the triple anaphora of the word "Nine", and the densely-packed texture of repeated words and internal rhymes, "Nine powers...nine flowers,/Nine powers...", serves only to intensify the awareness of Blodeuwedd's insensibility, her remoteness from human feeling:

Nine powers of nine flowers

Nine powers in me combined,
 Nine buds of plant and tree.
 Long and white are my fingers
 As the ninth wave of the sea.

Blodeuwedd speaks to us from a pre-human, wraith-like state. She cannot escape the boundaries of the spell which made her. The accumulation of numbers and powers, for all their magical connotations, does not add up to a complete person. The interaction of elements resolves itself into only the synecdoche of "fingers", a passing, fragmentary image which Graves succeeds in loading with mythological significance by a simile which reiterates the deathly symbolism of 'white' and associates it with the impassive cruelty of the Goddess. The "long", "white" fingers carry with them an air of menace strengthened by the numerical symbolism and the background image of the sea.

The ninth wave is traditionally the largest, loudest and most destructive. Moreover, since primitive times the moon has been known to draw the tides, and the ninth wave has been thought of as the wave which reaches up to the moon. Nine, in the Muse-symbolism, is the prime moon-number. The lunar 'whiteness' of Blodeuwedd betokens both the haunting beauty of the Goddess, and also the blind terror and destruction of the sea, which reaches out mercilessly to overwhelm the Goddess' victims. Blodeuwedd is another version of the treacherous female whose irresistible embrace brings death, the experience to which each victim must submit if he is to partake of her love.

The rituals of betrayal, which draw each set of protagonists into the claustrophobic confines of the single poetic theme, are most ably dramatised by Graves in the dialogue poems "The Young Cordwainer"¹⁷ and "Dialogue on the Headland".¹⁸ In these poems, the inscrutable, static image of the love goddess is replaced by a more fully human female voice, a woman who shares the doubts, fears and misgivings

of her partner. The male victim is less submissive, less certain of the meaningfulness of his fate and interrogates the Theme in order to understand his place within it. Although both characters are conscious of their roles within a drama over which they exercise only partial control, and address each other in a ritualised language which serves only to draw them more readily into the ceremony, their reluctance and bewilderment go some way to demythologising the Theme by restoring the dignity and intentionality of the human subjects.

The meaning of the ritual dialogue in "The Young Cordwainer" can be fully understood only in relation to "the mysterious twelfth-century French ballad of the Young Shoemaker" which Graves discusses briefly in The White Goddess,¹⁹ a fact inadequately appreciated by previous commentators.²⁰ The uncharacteristic uncertainty with which the woman speaks in Graves' poem is partially illuminated by his hypothesis that in the original ballad "The speaking parts have been interchanged":²¹

SHE: Love, why have you led me here
 To this lampless hall,
 A place of despair and fear
 Where blind things crawl?

The "lampless hall" contains many echoes of the mysterious haunted buildings peopled by guilt-ridden figures from Graves' earlier poetry. In particular, the "Lost manor" of "The Pier-Glass" is recalled in the emotions of "despair and fear" which emanate from the building. Graves exploits the misreading of the Theme by his precursor text, and proceeds to explore the poetic possibilities of transferring the fear and uncertainty to the woman. In the never altered circuit of the Theme it should be the woman who leads the man to the sacred enclosure where he will meet his doom. But in this variation it is "HE" who brings the woman to the moment of crisis, unequivocally

attributing their rendezvous in the "lampless hall" to her "complaint" that "desire died". It is the inescapable death of desire which precipitates the shift in the single poetic theme from one station to the next in the eternal cycle of love and abandonment.

The woman's regret and reluctance at what she has been brought to this place to perform do not obstruct her sense of the inevitable: "I declared what, alas, was true/And still shall do so". It requires the male's awareness of their role within the unfolding pattern to encourage her to "Mount, sweetheart, this main stair". But her fear does not deflect her from her path, and she needs him only to "Hold me fast by the left hand", because "I walk with closed eyes", in order to approach the central action of the drama, of which, in her deepest awareness, she is fully cognizant. The rhyme about the primrose and the periwinkle which the man recites, apparently incongruously, in fact underlines his grasp of the situation:

HE: Primrose has periwinkle
 As her mortal fellow:
 Five leaves, blue and baleful,
 Five of true yellow.

A gloss by Graves makes this clear:

The periwinkle was the flower of death in French, Italian and British folklore...The flower has five blue petals and is therefore sacred to the Goddess, and its tough green vines will have been the bonds she used on her victim. This can be deduced from its Latin name vincapervinca ('bind all about'), though medieval grammarians connected it with vincere, 'to conquer', rather than 'vincire', 'to bind', and so 'pervinke' came to mean 'the all-conquering'. But death is all-conquering; so it came to the same thing.²²

"The Young Cordwainer" is particularly effective at conveying the fear of death which the protagonists in the one story must face and overcome. The woman knows that the ritual in which she is involved

is preordained, but this does not diminish her fear or her unwillingness to proceed to the moment of crisis: "My feet stumble for dread,/My wits forsake me". Graves' reminder to us, in his commentary upon the precursor text, that the roles have been reversed in the ballad, does not stop him from re-reading the basic scenario himself in order to assimilate it to his own interpretation of the single poetic theme. When the woman comes "To a locked secret door/And a white-walled room", her confidence returns, and with it are awakened her memories of the ritual about to take place in the chamber:

SHE: Love, have you the pass-word,
 Or have you the key,
 With a sharp naked sword
 And wine to revive me?

Instead of simply reassigning the roles in the ballad to conform to his view of the primal scene, Graves negotiates a more complex settlement with the design of the original poem. In "The Young Cordwainer" the woman is not simply leading her beloved victim to his sacrifice. She is herself being led by the tanist, who springs up at the instant of desire's death, to the necessary murder of the lover who has fallen from her favour:

HE: Enter: here is starlight,
 Here the state bed
 Where your man lies all night
 With blue flowers garlanded.

Graves' gloss upon the original verse confirms this:

The beautiful lady with the many lovers and a great square bed hung with white linen is unmistakably the Goddess, and the young shoemaker is Llew LLaw...Those posies of periwinkles show that...the shoemaker will never rise again from the bridal couch. His bride will bind him to the bedpost, and summon his rival to kill him.²³

Full recognition of this symbolism is delayed until the

penultimate stanza where the appearance of the third member of the triad completes the pattern of the Theme, and releases the woman from the claustrophobic tensions of the "lampless hall". The "white-walled room" where the sacrifice is to take place becomes, in the woman's eyes, a "confessional" where the contradictions of love are resolved through the endlessly-repeated ritual of the murder of the lover by his rival, his second self, his weird. This is as far as Graves can take the image of his Goddess without compromising her divine inscrutability, but the sense of danger in "The Young Cordwainer" succeeds in establishing a middle ground between the distant artifice of the one story, which is always threatening to come adrift from what Yeats would have called "the fury and the mire of human veins"²⁴, and the living reality of men and women participating in the experience of heterosexual love.

A similar discontinuity between the emotional fabric of a relationship arrested at some instant of crisis or decision, and the larger narrative of the single poetic theme infects the speakers in "Dialogue on the Headland" with doubt and anxiety. The first thing the man is enjoined to do in "Dialogue" echoes the admonition which sent Juan away from the primal scene guarding his image of the Goddess: "Do not forget". When the woman pleads "You'll not forget these rocks and what I told you?" she restores Graves' memory myth to the centre of attention. The landscape is immediately appropriated by the lovers, to be used to recover their memory and their knowledge of the events which have unfolded upon it. The sublime certitude imparted by recognition of the Theme working its pattern through the contours of an individual relationship is vitiated by the emotional uncertainty which afflicts the woman, and breaks down into a neurotic discourse which calls into question all of the crucial experiences in their relationship. "Dialogue" becomes a sort of mummers play between two disembodied

voices inhabiting a figural landscape fitfully animated by their anxieties and obsessions.

The woman fears the loss of love, the death of desire which brought woman and tanist to the death-chamber of the beloved victim in "The Young Cordwainer".

SHE: What do you think might happen?
 Might you fall out of love?

Once again Graves deviates from the main thread of the Theme by presenting the female as the protagonist fraught with doubt. Her jealousy and visions of betrayal conjure up disordered images of nature, where "skies...fall/Raining their larks and vultures in our laps", where "seas turn to slime" and "water-snakes" hatch "with six heads", eliciting exaggerated declarations of fidelity from her lover. The dissonance of mind and nature deforms the motifs by which the presence of the Goddess is customarily felt.

It is the terrible loneliness of the relentless, baffling, ever-recurring cycle of births, loves and deaths that infests Graves' lovers with this anguish. Faced with the death of desire and the certain knowledge that "she" will "deny her words on oath", they have opened up before them a momentary vision of the cosmic wheel upon which their endlessly-recurring fate is bound, an infinite vista of days without end and countless numbers of defeated lovers, of whom they themselves are but another manifestation; the one story told and retold in a paranoid narrative from which there is no release:

SHE: How many other days can't you forget?
 How many other loves and landscapes?

Her questions reverberate with an anguish which is the obverse side of the memory myth: memory as the burden of a past which goes on repeating itself; the lovers trapped in a series of parallel landscapes

from parallel poems, their vagrant souls left to wander through endless incarnations recapitulating the same basic syndrome and never progressing towards a resolution. This is the nightmare which stalks the poet through all the joys and sufferings of the monomyth: the possibility that it is nothing more than the neurotic's inner tendency to yield to obsessive patterns of action; that very "repetition compulsion" that Freud perceived to be the origin of Unheimlich, the uncanny:

Every emotional affect, whatever its quality is transformed by repression into a morbid anxiety ...in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something which recurs...The uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.²⁵

Faced with this dark vision of the one story as a senseless round of suffering rooted in the pathological disturbances of the psyche, the man can only restate that capacity for endurance which sustains the king through his travails: "The past is past". Scrupulosity about the past and anxiety about the future melt before his recognition that "Whatever happens, this goes on". The victim is not invited to question, only to submit, a role which the male, despite his fears, can finally accept. Undeterred by even the likelihood of betrayal, when his lover will "lie snugly in the Devil's arms", his perseverance ("I said: 'Whatever happens.'") contrasts sharply with the woman's frantic and inconsolable yearning for assurance which tails off into an obsessive, dysphasic questioning no answer will satisfy: "You'll not forget me - ever, ever, ever?"

Liberation from the oppressive round of the single poetic theme is approached in "Darien",²⁶ another poem which dramatises the predicament of a woman caught in the meshes of her own poetic role. The basic

framework of "Darien" shows affinities with "To Juan at the Winter Solstice". It is another poem in the initiatory mode, where the interlocutor, in this case the poet's son, is apprised of some secret from the poet's dealings with his Muse. Darien's proximity to the events described is much closer than was Juan's, since "the one Muse" is hailed as "your mother, Darien", prior to her disclosure in one of the most dynamic images Graves offers of her in his verse, running...

...green-sleeved along her ridges,
Treading the asphodels and heather-trees
With white feet bare.

The Goddess-as-nymph here appears in a setting at first untroubled by the minatory aspects of sexual love; as Queen of the May or Lady of the Wild Things, presiding deity of the pastoral of innocence, one of the familiar habitats of the Goddess in Graves' poetry. Her motifs are initially exhibited so as to stress her maternal phase, "presaged by the darting halcyon bird". The building of the halcyon's nest at the midwinter solstice is said to announce the birth of the Sun-child,²⁷ the reborn sacred king whose return will restart the cycle of love and betrayal.

But there is no true innocence in Graves' pastoral, and the "cold shudder" which shakes the poet when he sees "the curved blaze of her Cretan axe" foreshadows the violent, sacrificial phase of the relationship between poet and Muse which lies ahead. Content that "her business" is "Not yet with me", the poet acquiesces in the role of distant lover until surprised by a chance encounter: "...once at the full moon, by the sea's verge,/I came upon her without warning".

The intimations of the Goddess with which "Darien" begins may be closely allied to the tracks, traces, echoes and mirages by which her half-illusory presence is made known in other devotional poems.

She "variously haunts" the pastoral landscape in "Darien", "presaged" by symbolic birds, leaving her tread among flowers, and glimpsed upon the horizon, passing "from sight", by a fervent devotee. Only the encounter in the fourth verse is with a real flesh and blood woman:

Unrayed she stood, with long hair streaming,
A cockle-shell cupped in her warm hands,
Her axe propped idly on a stone.

The "long hair streaming", the "warm hands", and even the casually discarded "axe propped idly on a stone", contrast sharply with the composed, statuesque tableaux of the Goddess from previous poems. Life, movement and naturalness are suggested in this description, leading the poet to realise "No awe possessed me", and prefiguring the poetically unprecedented act by which the Muse will speak to the poet for the first time in a purely magical setting. She exhibits the shyness of "a young girl" surprised by the suddenness of the encounter: "Wanly she smiled, but would not lift her eyes". Only the symbolic axe links this figure to the frightful divinity whose deathly beauty Juan was taught to associate with the lust of the mermaid, and whose perfidious lips beckoned the argonauts on their hopeless quest.

Graves' attempt to make plain in his poetry the truth insisted upon in his prose that the Muse can only be encountered through the living woman in whom she is incarnate is only partially successful. Although the woman in "Darien" speaks and has been caught in an uncharacteristically natural pose, her conversation with the poet settles immediately into a ritual dialogue concerned with the narrative of the one story which they both serve. The answer to her rhetorical question, "'If I lift my eyes to yours/And our eyes marry, man, what then?'" is contained in the ensuing description she herself offers

of the Sun-child Darien's attributes and purposes. It transpires that this apparently chance encounter has a larger purpose after all, and one which, in a sense, obstructs the possibility of genuine human contact between the two protagonists. Their meeting is to bring about the conception of the poet-victim's successor, the child whose birth ensures the next revolution of the cycle. The feelings of fear and doubt by which they are affected relate only to their roles within the supernatural drama, and perhaps reduce them to mere mouthpieces through which the one story is reiterated. A fully human meeting of minds and selves is prevented as each is cast unalterably into the parts they are preordained to act out, leaving little room for the subtle nuances of sexual interaction so richly documented in Graves' ordinary love lyrics.

When the Muse-woman speaks of "my son Darien", and associates him with the secrets of the Theme and the rewards of the pastoral, "'Guardian of the hid treasures of your world'", the poet, too, becomes conscious of the destiny which awaits him:

I knew then by the trembling of her hands
For whom that flawless blade would sweep:
My own oracular head, swung by its hair.

Despite the shortcomings of its account of the human relationship upon which poetic love is said to be based, "Darien" represents an advance in Graves' self-understanding as a poet, with far-reaching consequences for his later work. The tragic recognition which reveals to him that the conception of Darien will mean his own death also enhances his understanding of the new poetic powers which his submission will pile upon his "oracular head":

'Mistress', I cried, 'the times are evil
And you have charged me with their remedy.
O, where my head is now, let nothing be
But a clay counterfeit with nacre blink:

Only look up, so Darien may be born!

This utterance looks backwards to myth, and forward to history simultaneously. The speaker assumes the mythical role of the poet-priest-king about to be ritually slain by decapitation. In the sacrifice, his head is replaced by a mask, probably the prophetic mask for the oracular office he is then said to occupy as the Mother Goddess' totem and psychopomp. At the same time, his severed head, like that of Bran or, more significantly, Orpheus, "is made to sing, mourn and answer questions...until it finally consents to enter an oracular shrine, where it gives advice on all important occasions..."²⁸ The poet has passed on to a higher plane of poetic existence, and it is probably in this oracular form that he instructs Darien.

The response to history is contained in the poet's recognition that "...the times are evil/And you have charged me with their remedy", a sense of duty superficially at odds with Graves' self-proclaimed exile in a mythical pastoral totally indifferent to the concerns of the outside world. "The times" are precisely the "evil" from which he fled in the first place. "Darien" reformulates the exile stance in its quiet recognition of the poet's need to return to the world as an oracle of the Goddess' healing powers. The longed-for Darien, "the spell of knowledge", "The new green of my hope" can take up his role as "Guardian of the hid treasures" of the visionary pastoral, thereby releasing the oracular spirit of his poetic father, which, under the Goddess' charge, returns to the flow of historical time for a brief period in order to dispense her wisdom.

This particular modification of the single poetic theme, expressed in a poem whose major concern is the need to submit to the narrative thrust of the one story, represents a crucial and hard-won shift in Graves' outlook. It is a mythical statement of a change in

attitude - a change, perhaps, perceived as a legitimate extension to the myth - and prefigures the sudden flood of critical writings through which Graves was to try to apply the insights of the Theme to the cultural crisis afflicting an anxious age.

The Muse and Tradition

The best of Graves' critical writings have a twofold purpose. Their foremost aim is the defence of the single poetic theme, in particular the claim that "All true poetry...celebrates some incident or other of this ancient story..."²⁹ Graves scans the annals of English poetry searching for instances in which writers have been faithful to the Theme, and rooting out those who have rejected it in favour of the patriarchal, classical principles of Apollonian verse. As we shall see, the two artists whose work he deems most antipathetic to the Theme are Virgil and Milton. Against these figures Graves arranges a counter-tradition of Muse-poets who have held to the values of pastoral love and the salient experiences of the Theme from antiquity into modern times.

However, this endeavour has repercussions which set off the second purpose of the criticism. Increasingly in his prose writings, in seeming adherence to the Goddess' reminder that "'the times are evil/And you have charged me with their remedy'", Graves addresses himself directly to the culture of modernity which, he insists, has moved further and further away from the values of love, nature and the feminine. Myth is turned to polemical ends in this process, employed to produce an analysis of the malaise afflicting industrial civilization in its slavish addiction to the rule of law, patriarchy, power, commerce and war. Something of this prophetic stance is anticipated in the closing reflections of The White Goddess:

Though the West is still nominally Christian, we have come to be governed by the unholy triumvirate of Pluto, god of wealth, Apollo god of science, and Mercury god of thieves. To make matters worse, dissension and jealousy rage openly between these three, with Mercury and Pluto blackguarding each other, while Apollo wields the atomic bomb as if it were a thunderbolt; for since the Age of Reason was heralded by his eighteenth-century philosophers, he has seated himself on the vacant throne of Zeus (temporarily indisposed) as Triumviral Regent.³⁰

Graves uses the mythopoeic mode in this passage as the vehicle for a penetrating historical allegory, in order to offer a clearer imaginative account of the crisis besetting modern man. This brings him close to the much older allegorical methods by which Renaissance mythographers conscripted pagan lore to their philosophical humanism. Graves' only deviation from this method is to be found in his stout refusal to use his pastoral mythology for explicitly didactic ends, the first crime against poetry for which Virgil is indicted: "Virgil's Eclogues were a formalizing of the more narrowly bucolic idylls of Theocritus...he used the pastoral situation as a convenient rostrum for moral philosophy..."³¹ The single poetic theme does not offer a programme for restructuring the social order. But its romantic primitivism, and its resolute defence of the integrity of the personal life, have implications for the way people live which lead inexorably to the conclusion that "the system is due for revolutionary change."³²

Graves rejects the overt alliance of poetry and politics because of the fundamental privacy of the realm which poetry inhabits, an inner world resistant to the scrutiny of the public gaze and the expediency of the state. "Monstrous Milton" is repeatedly singled out for his deliberate failure to distinguish between the two forms of discourse:

Milton was by nature a politician rather than a poet, and during the Commonwealth abandoned his

over-cultivated early lyricism for politico-religious controversy in prose. He returned to poetry only after the extinction of his political hopes, and then to a poetry with both lyricism and political hate disciplined away, in which he attempted to establish psychological equivalence between the religious and the poetic temperament.³³

The pursuit of politics redirects the energies of the poet away from contemplation of the Theme, and stifles his capacity for appreciating the essentially feminine mysteries of pastoral love. This is the main cause of Milton's apostasy, a crime against the Muse to which Graves returns again and again in his prose. The poet's quarrel with history arises primarily from his refusal to admit the claims of the public domain, a refusal which makes him "independent of fashion and public service, a servant only of the true Muse, committed on her behalf to continuous personal variations on a single pre-historic or post-historic, poetic theme..."³⁴

The clash between myth and history, between writing which concerns itself with a mythical event transcending history, and writing which freely grapples with the issues of power and authority instantiated within history, is felt most acutely in the character of Milton because of his poetic self-consciousness:

To me Milton has always been a monster and a renegade who, as soon as he had perfected himself in the trivium of verse-writing, abandoned his half-hearted allegiance to the Muse and set himself up as a grand quadrivial anti-poet.³⁵

It is noteworthy that Graves uses the same expletives in this description as he did at the outset of his career: "monster" is an echo of the "Monstrous Milton" of the juvenile verse "John Skelton". But now the loathing has been assimilated to the poetic framework of The White Goddess, and Milton is unqualifyingly condemned as not only a "bad" or "fake poet" (to borrow the terminology of Poetic

Unreason),³⁶ but as an "anti-poet".

In order to understand what Graves intends by this title, it is necessary to appreciate that his attitude stems from a closely-read argument with Milton - hence the carefully-chosen title of the main essay in which the argument is conducted, "The Ghost of Milton",³⁷ to indicate some form of person-to-person contact, in the manner of the "analeptic" trope which is built into The White Goddess. Graves concedes that Milton is a redoubtable artist, that "the effect of Paradise Lost is...overpowering".³⁸ But he goes on: "is the function of poetry to overpower? To be overpowered is to accept spiritual defeat. Shakespeare never overpowers: he raises up".³⁹

This objection lies at the heart of Graves' view. The only true poetry is that which celebrates the course of heterosexual love. The recognition by a poet of the imperatives laid upon him when he commits himself to the single poetic theme entails an expansion of his capacity for love and sympathy. It is in this dimension that Milton fails so totally according to Graves. In Paradise Lost "the majesty of certain passages is superhuman, but their effect is finally depressing and therefore evil" because "it was not the Holy Ghost that dictated Paradise Lost...but Satan the protagonist, demon of pride".⁴⁰ Pride, of course, is the antithesis of selfless love, the final demonic form of "the arbitrary male will".⁴¹ It is Milton's "lack of love, for all his rhetorical championship of love against lust", which "makes him detestable".⁴²

The anxiety of this particular influence is a complex one, reaching into the deepest patterns of Graves' aesthetic. It is a passionate misreading of, and resistance to, Milton, rooted in a genuine moral antipathy and directed against Milton's conceited perversion of poetic goals as Graves perceives them:

...Milton was not a great poet, in the sense in

which Shakespeare was great. He was a minor poet with a remarkable ear for music, before diabolic ambition impelled him to renounce the true Muse and bloat himself up, like Virgil (another minor poet with the same musical gift) into a towering, rugged major poet.⁴³

The premises may be badly mistaken, but the argument is waged with a careful consistency which acknowledges the strength of the opponent's case, and attempts to demonstrate, rather than merely assert, the objections. The inclusion of Virgil, who was, after all, Milton's model of the epic poet, is not gratuitous. Graves is waging an essentially pastoral argument against the diction and ambitions of the epic sensibility, an intertextual contest the roots of which go back to the assertion of pastoral values against the epic virtues of war and heroism that was evident in the work of Owen and his contemporaries. The shadow of the Great War and the conflicts to which it gave rise between epic and pastoral, exile and complicity, is not far from this debate.

We noted earlier the uniformity of the condemnation of Milton which stretches back as far as "John Skelton" in exactly the way that the rejection of Virgil goes back to "Virgil the Sorcerer". In both cases Graves manifests his disapprobation by an unflattering comparison of the giants with some favourite of his own, be it the clever magician who shared Virgil's name or the ribald courtesan Skelton. It is as though Graves must organize his pattern of influence and tradition in a dialectical series: Virgil the Sorcerer is sanctioned at the expense of Virgil Maro; Skelton at the expense of Milton; the endorsement of one is, by implication, the repudiation of the other; if one is a poet, the other is an anti-poet. The pattern of antithesis has to be maintained because of the threat to true poetry posed by the influence of leviathans like Virgil and Milton:

The English poet for whom he felt the strongest

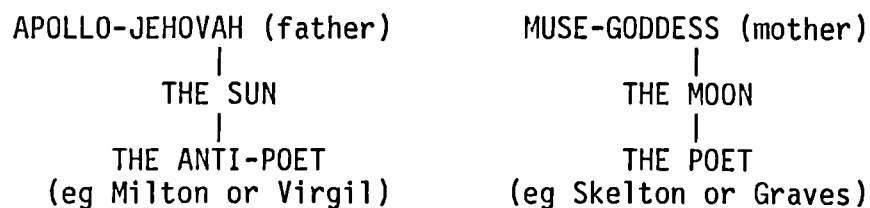
antipathy was John Skelton, in whom poetic love was instinctive, whose conscience never made a coward of him and who openly repudiated all unnatural austerities in the service of the Muse Calliope. Here I suspect retrospective jealousy in Milton, masked as virtuous scorn, for a man who had won degrees at three, not merely two, universities; whom Erasmus had described as 'the light and glory of English letters'; and whom Henry VIII, a poet himself, had crowned with laurel.⁴⁴

The struggle with Milton edges closer to the central tenets of the single poetic theme in the essay "How Poets See",⁴⁵ where Graves attempts to show how Milton's personal photophobia was, by a huge effort of will, incorporated into the epic structure and patriarchal mythology of his chief works: "Sight to Milton was painful; he loved light but it hurt him".⁴⁶ Graves quotes from "Il Penseroso" as evidence: "And when the sun begins to fling/His flaring beams, me Goddess bring/To arched walks of twilight groves.../Hide me from day's garish eie". He further cites Comus, where Milton defends the painful dazzle of bright light as the only means of containing man's lust to look unhindered upon everything and attain to God's omniscience. Otherwise "...they below/Would grow inur'd to light, and come at last/To gaze upon the Sun with shameless brows". Graves goes on:

But though he is here making a virtue of his photophobic weakness, interpreting it as humility and temperance, his secret ambition was to gaze on the Sun direct...In Samson Agonistes, Samson does not long for colour and familiar sights - he longs only for light. Milton desired to be in relation to the Sun or to solar truth, what the Son was to the Father.⁴⁷

The key to Graves' meaning, here, is located in the function of the emblems in relation to the single poetic theme. "To gaze on the Sun direct" is emblematic of Milton's yearning to become the Word of God incarnate as poet even as the Son is the Word of God incarnate as Saviour. "Solar truth" is the fiat of Apollo-Jehovah,

the Sun-god who usurped the place of the Goddess and appropriated all of her symbols of poetic inspiration to his rule of reason and law. Milton, therefore is the antithesis of the Poet even as Apollo-Jehovah is the antithesis of the Muse, and the Sun is the antithesis of the Moon. Milton's anti-poethood rests on his decision to renounce the inspiration of the Muse in favour of that of Apollo-Jehovah. The polarity may be represented thus:



Historically, anti-poetry replaces poetry, Apollo overthrows the Goddess as a belief system. But true poetry persists in a counter-tradition of its own. The danger presented by a Virgil or a Milton lies in their turning prodigious and oppressive talents to antipoetic ends; their attempts to reconstitute the nature of poetry in a new form in violation of the tenets of the single poetic theme.

Graves reminds his readers continuously that he does not underestimate the potency of the Miltonic vision. Milton did not write in ignorance of the Muse: he renounced her. Like the God he serves, Milton's vigour resides in his ability to turn the symbolism of the Muse against her, to consolidate it to the patriarchal account of the world in the iconotropic style of his Aryan forebears. Milton's self-dramatisation as the Old Testament hero Samson is, according to Graves, of the same order of revision. Milton's Samson is also the instrument of divine will, untimely blinded whilst in pursuit of his mission, and tormented by victorious enemies who force him to the task of turning the millstones.

The full anxiety of Graves' struggle with the ghost of Milton, to

wrest from him the symbolism he has stolen and perverted, is apparent in the contradictory, yet curiously parallel, understanding of the Sun-hero Samson that is present in the work of each. In Graves' reading of the mythology, Samson is a version of the culture hero Hercules, the most authentic personification of the year-god, the beloved victim of the White Goddess. It is to Hercules, or some analagous figure such as Dionysus or the Celtic god Ogma Sun-face, that the origin of the sacred alphabet is attributed. It is Hercules who, through his heroic labours, works his way through the annual cycle of death and rebirth, from station to station, until his ritual sacrifice and apotheosis under the aegis of the Mother Goddess. We shall explore the meaning of this enigmatic figure in Graves' verse and prose in the final chapter of this study. It is enough to observe that both Milton and Graves identify closely with Samson-Hercules, discerning in his fate the profile of the poet's transactions with the divine source of inspiration to whom he is dedicate. Each of them, in his different way, adopts the Samson-Hercules persona as a means of dramatising the suffering which follows from their vocation. The incompatibility of the reasons for doing so is effectively conveyed in a passage from Graves' mythography:

The main problem of paganism is...'how can one escape from the Wheel?' This was the problem of the blinded Sun-hero Samson when he was harnessed to the corn-mill of Gaza; and it should be noted that the term 'corn-mill' was applied in Greek philosophy to the revolving heavens. Samson resolved the problem magnificently by pulling down both posts of the temple so that the roof collapsed on everyone.⁴⁸

As we shall see, the temple posts between which Samson is chained, like the pillars of Hercules, are engraved with the sacred alphabet that spells out the story of his endlessly-recurring life and death. To pull this structure down is to escape from the wheel, the never-

altered circuit. But it is also to repudiate the role of poet-victim, an action which Milton, whose identification with the Sun-hero seemed sealed by his blindness, interpreted as a final gesture of defiance towards the Muse and a confirmation of his devotion to God.

Samson was a Palestinian Sun-god...That he belonged to an exogamic and therefore matrilinear society is proved by Delilah's remaining with her own tribe after marriage...The name 'Samson' means 'Of the Sun' and 'Dan', his tribe, is an appellation of the Assyrian Sun-god.⁴⁹

Milton's assumption of the Samson mask is ironically appropriate. He, too, is 'Of the Sun', in his role as God's servant. He too suffers blindness, feels betrayed by woman, experiences desolation, is mocked by triumphant enemies, and, according to Graves, associates a lost vitality with his hair:

At Cambridge he wore very long hair and had the reputation of being narcissistic: 'Our Lady of Christ's' was his nickname. He cherished the recollection in his gouty old age and made blind Samson lament:

...these redundant locks
Robustious to no purpose clustering down.⁵⁰

Two very different understandings of poetry clash briefly in the encounter between Graves and Milton, allowing the later poet to create an aesthetic space in which his own version of one of the central myths of the Western tradition, that of the murder of the god, can be realised. If current theories of influence-as-conflict⁵¹ have any truth in them, then similar problems faced Cowper, Blake, Shelley, even Eliot, in their times. Frank Kermode has written of Milton: "From his university days on, he was possessed of a self-awareness as a poet that could still, without limitation or qualification, transcend self-consciousness in a way that became almost impossible in literary history after, and perhaps because of, him."⁵²

Graves' loathing is simply another version of the same dilemma.

The function of the much fought-over Samson persona illustrates the nature of the conflict. Graves and Milton are fighting over the same materials, and the Samson mask provides Graves with an opportunity to show exactly how far short of the truth Milton falls. It also facilitates a rewriting of Milton's version, a restoration of the authentic, primitive meaning of poetic symbolism. The feud is therefore a fundamental one, embroiling two powerful minds in two irreconcilable accounts of the poet and his work.

A particularly powerful strain of primitivism, derived from his monomyth, runs through Graves' critical writings, associating the composition of verse with the practice of magico-religious rites that are central to the defence of the Theme and the idea of literary tradition. The mythical founding moment of Graves' tradition is located to a primordial prehistoric time

...when the king enjoyed no executive power,
being merely a sacred consort of the queen and
under her magic tutelage. The queen appointed
druids, or oak-men, skilled in magical charms
...king and druid owed allegiance to the sovereign
goddess incarnate in the queen - the goddess who
was still nostalgically invoked in Classical
Greece by the *Homeridae*, as the Muse - meaning
the Mountain-goddess.⁵³

Ideas of the Muse, the matriarchy, the Goddess, authentic poetry, and authentic religion converge upon this version of the primal scene. It is the mythical point of origin for Graves' account of the relationship between tradition and the individual talent, justifying "...the sense enjoyed by every English poet since the time of Chaucer, that he forms part of a long and honourable tradition"⁵⁴ and generating the analeptic trope by which the poet gains "A sense of kinship with poets of an earlier age..."⁵⁵

For the poet committed to a magical explanation of the origins of

poetry, reflections upon the anthropology of poetic discourse inevitably adopt the inflections of myth, as Graves does in his extended essay on poetic diction, "Harp, Anvil, Oar".⁵⁶ In this analysis Graves tries to reach behind the tradition to the primitive sources of poetry, in the belief that the concept of tradition transcends its apparently cultural denotation and, in its fullest sense, is as old as the consciousness of the race. Using the revelatory power of myth, summed up in the religious formula "'Her power is to open what is shut; to shut what is open'",⁵⁷ Graves tries to come to terms with the mechanics of verse-craft in the larger context of poetic inspiration and its carefully veiled history. This history has been disguised in order to protect its secrets from its enemies; myth functioning in the capacity of the lapwing who 'hides the secret' in forms which only poetic, not rational, thought can recover: the historical grammars of poetic myth.

Poetic myth is a cipher in which is encoded the secret literary traditions and symbolic truths of poetry. In order to demonstrate the manner in which the cipher functions, Graves takes the famous Irish poetic symbol of that whalebone harp and constellates it within the Monomyth:

What is the whale? An emblem of the White Love-goddess Rahab, Ruler of the Sea, who used yearly to destroy her sacred kings in numerous cities from Connought to the Persian Gulf, until at last the god Enlil, or Marduk (or Jehovah, according to the Prophet Isaiah) killed her with the new-fangled weapon the sword - the Babylonians claimed in a hymn that he sliced her like a flatfish. But the king of Bablyon still had to do ritual battle with her every year, be swallowed, and spewed up again on the third day, as Jonah was.⁵⁸

In narratives like this, mythopoeic thought again becomes a form of knowledge in its own right. The argument revolves around the interpretation of a series of motifs which are resolved into

an internally-consistent and symbolic whole embracing every feature of the poetic life: "The emblems of the Muse Trinity are a white dove in the sky, a white hind in the forest, a whale taking his pastime in the depth of the sea."⁵⁹ From this Graves is able to recreate the primitive myth which justifies the remarkable romantic metaphor of the Aeolian harp:

...the wind...(spiritus, pneuma) is the emblem of inspiration. The bones of Rahab the Whale may lie stranded on the shore; but, for a poet, there is more truth in her dead sinews than in Marduk's living mouth. When Macuel son of Miduel heard the wind howling tunefully in the Aeolian harp of the whale's skeleton, he bethought himself and built a more manageable one from the same materials. And when he struck his harp and cried: 'Sing to me, Muse!' this was no formal invitation - Rahab herself sang at his plea.⁶⁰

The fluency of Graves' syncretic thinking cannot be better exemplified than in this rendering of the parable of poetic inspiration. By its commitment to the magical view of poetry, poetry as a link with a lost mythic mystique, it makes a mockery of Grant's suggestion⁶¹ that Graves' mythography is simply a harvest of motifs in the manner of the Renaissance collectors. We are much closer to the shamanism and irrationalism of Dodds' Orphic mystery cults. The articles of the parable connect the drama of the one story, and of the defeat of the Great Goddess, with the myth of the origins of poetic inspiration. Nowhere else, not even in The White Goddess, does Graves achieve such lucidity. Macuel embodies the ability of poetry to survive the collapse of Muse-worship as a religious system, and, in the marvellous metaphor of the Aeolian harp made from her dead bones, to cherish and communicate the mysterious impulse of poetic inspiration. In the midst of defeat, Macuel represents the capacity of poetry for perpetual self-renewal.

Working in the mythopoeic mode allows Graves to equate the rhythmical

properties of verse with the religious practices observed in honour of the Goddess during the mythical period of her supremacy:

When two hammers answer each other five times on the anvil - ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum - five in honour of the five stations of the Celtic year, there you have Chaucer's familiar hendecasyllabic line.⁶²

No aspect of poetry cannot be embraced by the logic of the Theme, the influence of which upon metre Graves subsequently traces to the shamanistic ritual of the Dionysiac sacrifice:

Greek verse-craft is linked to the ecstatic beat of feet around a rough stone altar sacred to Dionysus...probably to the sound of the dactylic drum played by a princess or a priest...The Greeks also admitted the iambic, traditionally named in honour of lasciviously hobbling Iambe...Iambic metre may have begun with Helladic totem dances which imitated the hobbling of partridge or quail...There was also the spondaic measure derived from the gloomy double-stamp of buskined mourners, arousing some dead hero to drink libations (spondae) that they poured for him... A metrical Tine in Greek poetry represents the turn taken by a dancer around an altar or tomb, with a caesura marking the half-way point: the metre never varies until the dancers have dropped with fatigue.⁶³

The very rhythms of poetry radiate from the primal scene, from the initial sacrificial event that marks the irruption of the single poetic theme into the ritual life of the community, and the consciousness of the poet or shaman who guards the gateway between the worlds.

Graves is careful to distinguish between ancient Greek and ancient Celtic concepts because of the much closer relationship the latter has to the English tradition of which he himself is a part: "Irish poetry is to English poetry as...the Pharisaic synagogue is to the Christian Church: an antecedent which historians are tempted to forget or belittle."⁶⁴ Irish poets owed allegiance, according to Graves, to the Triple-Goddess Brigid who, in her three persons guarded

the mysteries of metre and rhythm. To this the English tradition added the seafaring Anglo-Saxons' beat, "based on the slow pull and push of the oar".⁶⁵ In his native voice the English poet "lays down the hammer and reaches for the oar. Instead of:

Honour and freedom, truth and courtesy,

he writes:

Truth and honour / freedom and courtesy

and this has been the English verse-tradition ever since".⁶⁶ The greatest value of this particular aspect of Graves theory rests in its broadening of the Theme's terms of reference to include a definition of prosody in keeping with the magical nature of poetry.

The great burden of modern poetry is its responsibility to preserve the magical formulae of the one story in an age when its motifs no longer occupy the nexus between community and power, when there are no more secrets, and the poet's shamanistic faculties isolate rather than integrate him. Implicit in this assessment is an indirect justification of the project of The White Goddess. Creating the historical grammar of poetic myth is conceived as a massive act of recovery which revitalizes contemporary understanding of the potent, yet obscured, tradition of Muse-poetry by valorizing a long-dormant symbolism through the intermediary language of philosophical anthropology. Graves is wise enough to recognize that the primitive vision of the barbaric Lunar Muse cannot again command the assent of men and women who live in demythologised times. But he is eager to see this as a challenge rather than a defeat. "With the passing of the Epic, followed by the formal Elegy, and the Ode", he writes, "of what does poetry now consist?"⁶⁷ The gradual falling away of the mythic episteme, the common religio-poetic culture by which explicitly

mythopoeic poems are to be understood, demands two responses: that love poetry concentrate upon an accurate portrayal of the relations between men and women in a language approximating "the natural rhythm of speech";⁶⁸ and that the work of great, encyclopedic undertakings such as The White Goddess be taken up as part of the form of those poems which seek to honour the Goddess in specifically mythical language. Graves' answer to his own question is unambiguous:

It is reduced, at last, to practical poems, namely the lyrical or dramatic highlights of the poet's experiences with the Goddess in her various disguises. The prose setting is withheld; and, because of this, professional standards demand that it should either explain itself fully, or present a note, as schoolchildren do who arrive late or without some necessary part of their school equipment.⁶⁹

The emphasis upon 'lateness' is the particular burden of the anxiety of influence that afflicts modern poetry. The 'mythopoeic' poet feels this especially acutely because the vast repertoire of mythological motifs once available to his predecessors is now culturally degraded: "The prose setting is withheld". Without the existence of a symbolic system ideologically active in the poet's surrounding culture, the mythopoeic mode must "present a note"; it must strengthen its truth-claims by the renovation of lost grammars of poetic myth which refurbish the symbolism with the aura of significance and potency. This is the major project of Graves' writing, the endeavour which unites his work to the timelessness of a tradition unaffected by the vicissitudes of history because consoled by the satisfaction of a meta-historical myth.

Eliot's formulation of the "historical sense" of the tradition expressed a similar unease about the pressure of history upon the poem. But Eliot's idea of cultural order, for all its metaphysical pathos, was compelled to struggle with history in a way that Graves' theory,

because of its loyalty to an event which occurs in a "pre-historical or post-historical" space, is not. Graves echoes Eliot's sense of the synchronicity of tradition, its awareness "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence",⁷⁰ in his commitment to the fiction of the analeptic-proleptic trope, which solves the problem of the poem's relations to history by abolishing history:

...poets do tend to live in a timeless world
 where their predecessors are as real to them as
 their contemporaries. But I find that the pre-
 decessors whom I love...are not those who, when
 they wrote, had designs on me as their posterity,
 but those who lived in the present and trafficked
 with the past.⁷¹

The analeptic-proleptic trope is revealed in this formulation as a reflex of Graves' exile from the discourse of contemporary culture; a self-imposed exclusion which reiterates the arcadian's refusal of history in the name of his timeless pastoral. The elite consciousness of the writer, in this version of the tradition-myth, overcomes his complicity in the process of history by imagining the communion of poets in a category of experience where the tensions of history present no obstacles to understanding.

Graves' account of the relationship between tradition and the individual poet repeats, then, that same clash between history and myth that we have seen, throughout this study, to be a direct consequence of the ambivalence of myth. Seemingly concerned with the continuity of an unbroken historical tradition, the myth in fact divorces poetic consciousness from history, establishing poetry as a species of discourse outside history, where poets are linked to each other by the trope Graves calls "analeptic mimesis".⁷²

The elite awareness of the writer is embodied, according to Graves, in the spirit of "The Dedicated Poet",⁷³ a succession of writers who have preserved the Theme by guarding and recycling its most significant

motifs in that other, inner realm that Graves insists is also discontinuous with the rational processes of history: the unconscious:

Muse poetry is composed at the back of the mind: an unaccountable product of a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger or grief are profoundly engaged, though at the same time powerfully disciplined; in which intuitive thought reigns supralogically, and personal rhythm subdues metre to its purposes. The effect on readers of Muse poetry, with its opposite poles of ecstasy and melancholia, is what the French call a frisson, and the Scots call a 'grue' - meaning the shudder provoked by fearful or supernatural experiences.⁷⁴

This interiorisation of poetry, identifying it with deep private experiences, such as falling "desperately in love", or facing "personal disaster",⁷⁵ allying it to the unclassifiable processes of the unconscious mind, is another form of that radical turning-away, turning inwards, which seals off the poem from the pressures of reason and history. "A dedicated poet", Graves writes, "sees history as a dangerous deviation from the true course of human life..."⁷⁶ History as a falling-away from that gnostic myth of pure understanding sets the poet free from the material conditions, the conflicts of discursive practices, out of which his work is created, and propels him into exile, myth, and the self-sufficiencies of a pastoral solitude exempt from the passage of time.

Myth and History

The theory of poetry which tries to raise the writer's art out of the quagmire of history into the purity of myth cannot survive unaltered through a crisis which the sensitivity of the poet interprets as the irruption of myth into history, or as the return of the repressed. The struggle between reason and intuition, Muse-poetry and Apollonian art, myth and the 'dangerous deviation' that is history,

assumes a different character when the poet becomes aware of, or, indeed, has lived through, convulsions which shake the established order to its foundations. The essentially private world of poetry is revealed as an unavoidably oppositional stance when the "visible calamity" of a world in crisis suddenly impinges upon the poet's thought, its complicity in a tottering culture rapidly exposed.

This is the transition dramatically announced in "Darien", when the poet, alert to the oracular potential of his service to the Muse, finally recognizes that "'the times are evil/And you have charged me with their remedy'". The single poetic theme can be applied to the turmoils of the age in the hope of uncovering the deep spiritual forces shaping human life. It is while considering the relationship between the dedicated poet and his environment that Graves realises that the language of myth affords a unique vocabulary for coming to terms with the radical breakdown in the conditions sustaining the patriarchal Apollonian ethos of Western civilization. His insight is expressed in a mythopoeic allegory drawn straight from the symbolism of the single poetic theme:

An ancient Greek prophecy is being fulfilled
before our eyes. Apollo, the God of Science,
having formed a conspiracy with his half-brother
Hermes, god of Politics, and his uncle Plutos,
god of Money, has emasculated Almighty Zeus with
the same curved sickle, laid up at Sicilian
Drepana, that Zeus used on his father Cronus.
Zeus still remains propped on his throne, but
a Regency Council of Three has taken over his
powers. In this new anarchical era anything may
happen. That the Divine Triumvirate are suspicious
of one another, and that their rival ambitions
have made them careless of mankind, is proved by
the absurd cold war now being waged between East
and West, with the massive resources of Science,
Politics and Money. They have cut civilization
loose from its moorings: familiar coasts of
orthodox religion, philosophy and economics fade
in the distance. Crazy new cults are preached,
old ones revived; ghosts supposedly laid centuries
ago creep out of their graves, not only at dusk
but by broad daylight. And the ancient sovereign
Goddess, who has been waiting these last three

thousand years to return with power observes
her opportunity.⁷⁷

This passage illustrates the epistemological level at which, according to Graves, myth operates. Speaking "as a poet...in mythical language"⁷⁸ involves a shift in the mode of discourse precipitated by the acuteness of the crisis which the poet describes. Mythical language is a superior form of communication which unveils the truth obscured by the activities of Apollo the God of Reason. The improved consciousness conferred by the mythopoeic mode exposes the bankruptcy of Apollo's lies and deceit, shows how he has rewritten history, and relocates the poet in the true ground of his being.

Since Apollo rules by the supremacy of reason, and so arranges the world as to make it comprehensible solely through the categories of reason, the element which most threatens his rule is the irrational, the element of which, in the shamanistic traditions, man's magical soul was thought to be composed. Poetry begins in the irrational. The apparently seamless garment of the Apollonian order is torn open by the irrational forces of the unconscious, and also by that most massive outbreak of the irrational: war.

For Graves the instrument of escape, essentially Apollonian in origin, but in its effects straining the Apollonian categories to breaking-point, is war. We recall that, in one of the final tableaux of The White Goddess, "Apollo wields the atomic bomb as if it were a thunderbolt".⁷⁹ The values cherished by the Apollonian dispensation, such as reason, order, principle, pride, patriarchalism, aggression, the scientific method, the glorification of the machine, find their unavoidable climax in war. The result of the combination is irresistible.

Personal reflection, as much as a belief in the validity of myth and in his own scheme of world history, informs Graves' view of reason

and poetry. His own creativity, though not sparked off by war, took a whole new direction as a consequence of the neurasthenia he suffered after 1918. His liberation from the idea of human destiny mediated by his culture came about as a result of mental disorder. Poetry became the key to the reintegration of his psyche, and in the exploration of poetry and its inherited forms of figurative language he at last unearthed the single poetic theme, which represented his neurasthenia to him as liberation from reason.

The long passage where Graves speaks "as a poet", alternating mythic discourse and ordinary language, works on a neat reversal of one of the main precepts of The Greek Myths. There Graves had written: "A large part of Greek myth is politico-religious history",⁸⁰ and had gone on to offer numerous studies of the traditional Greek myths in terms of the slow replacement of the matriarchal structure by the patriarchal. In "The Dedicated Poet" he demonstrates how the process can be worked in reverse, i.e. how ongoing politico-religious history can be translated into myth. The aim of this method is to illustrate his conviction that history can be read as a continuous symbolic narrative chronicling the fortunes of the Feminine. Indeed, for Graves it is essential that history be seen in this way because it is the understanding closest to our human condition. It employs the same poetic grammar as that in which the experience of personal relationships is best expressed. It binds the microcosm of the individual to the macrocosm of humanity - the dream of those distant hieratic city states - and it places the drama of the one story at the centre of human history. Poets are then seen to be dramatizing not merely the private world of feelings and emotions, or changes in the religious attitudes of mankind, but a Theme which provides us with the key to all of our history, from its dimmest origins to its modern confusion, or what Graves calls "scientific pluto-democracy"⁸¹ The ennui which

besets contemporary civilization can be successfully defined in terms of the changes which have come upon mankind since its abandonment of the worship of the Goddess and of the society which grew up around it. The shift in devotion from the Goddess to the Allfather, be he Zeus or Jehovah, brought about one form of decline. But still worse is the replacement of devotion to the Allfather by the worship of money, the pursuit of political power, and belief in salvation through technology.

Graves is especially concerned to show how myth can cut through the rhetoric of the age and reveal the true ground of its predicament. The grim truth of the modern era is revealed in its hollow post-patriarchal values: science, money and power. The course of history has taken a new twist: from matriarchy, to patriarchy, on to what Graves names in another text "mechanarchy"⁸² a neologism which usefully combines 'anarchy' with 'the rule of the machine', and which is appropriate for an era of spiritual confusion oppressed by the burden of hyper-technology.

However, if Graves' mythical treatment of "scientific pluto-democracy" serves to emphasize its horror and desolation, it also seeks to highlight his belief that the worse things become then the greater the likelihood of the Apollonian dispensation collapsing altogether. The Goddess' opportunity has arrived. Graves' vision is apocalyptic. The demise of the patriarchal order, the seeds of which were sown from the moment of its triumph, can be read in the signs of the times, such as "the absurd cold war now being waged between East and West". Read symptomatically, the ensuing confusion may revive the matriarchal option, offering "a wholesome change from the wholly negative cult of scientific pluto-democracy".⁸³ Already,

The political and economic emancipation of women,
which was needed to implement Zeus' downfall has
had unforeseen consequences...and a small but

powerful minority find themselves free to be simply women, clear of male tutelage. With these newcomers woman's magical power over man, so long curbed, reappears in something of its primitive glory and ferociousness; and the uglier the anarchy caused by this demise of Father Zeus and the quarrels of his successors, the better becomes the Goddess' chances...84

Graves is shrewd enough to temper his feminism with an awareness of the strength of the interests that prosper either through the vestiges of patriarchalism or as a result of the mechanarchic chaos:

It is possible, of course, that the Triumvirate will patch up their differences, make common cause, and try to hang the Goddess from the vault of Heaven once more, with anvils tied to her feet, which was Father Zeus' way...85

But he ends his mythical analysis with characteristic resilience, unwilling to be bowed by the evils of the twentieth-century, encouraged by the signs he sees of the Goddess' return, and committed to the prophetic task which transforms the single poetic theme into both a critique of, and remedy for, the times:

Meanwhile, Muse-poets who understand what is at stake, even more clearly perhaps than historians and anthropologists, can provide the emotional physic to which the rising generation, many of them painfully caught in the Goddess' net, will take recourse.86

The emergence in Graves' criticism of a polemic directed towards the culture he ostensibly repudiated, marks a dramatic shift in outlook for Graves. The figurative and literal exile through which Graves discovered his Triple Muse and a pastoral mythology rooted in the magical account of man's nature and destiny, required no commerce with the public domain, the domain of history. The Goddess and her array of shining motifs occupy a space anterior to history, and therefore accessible only through the irrational operations of poetry

and the interpersonal experiences of the private, erotic relationship of poet and Muse. Even the tradition of Muse-poets, which masquerades as a historical continuum, is seen, upon analysis, to be based upon a fiction which abolishes time and dissociates the poet from any involvement with history.

The single poetic theme is, however, drawn back into a dialogue with the cultural concerns of the age by the recognition of the poet's oracular authority, the belief that a moment of crisis opens up a channel between myth and history, and offers the possibility of reinstituting the power of poetry and the resources of a long-dead mythical language. It is this point of crisis, more than anything else, signalling the breakdown of the established worldview, which affords the opportunity for the single poetic theme to address itself to the anxieties of the age. "Civilized man", Graves writes, "...has lost touch with the ideas of mystery, grace and love that originally informed his spirit."⁸⁷ It becomes the purpose of the Theme to reconnect man with this mystery, the centre of which is a vision of Woman as life-giver, lover and moral centre.

Behind the theory of the matriarchy we could see the outline of a less acceptable definition of woman, imprisoned by biologism, atavism and an essentialist, predetermined pattern of human interaction blind to individual choice and intention. Behind the untrammelled eroticism of the one story is the dim outline of a savage algolagniac love-death in which the body is repeatedly maimed, the spirit repeatedly oppressed, according to the formula of a horrifyingly violent and endless ritual.

But the deep-seated doubleness of myth manifests itself even here, at the critical juncture of Graves' poetry and prose. The single poetic theme can be actuated as a bold critique of the spiritual vastation of modernity; not to reconstruct disintegrating ideas of

order, but to call into question the unexamined cultural foundations of industrial civilization. The turn towards woman, with its concomitant assumption that it is gender, not power, that corrupts, facilitates a penetrating analysis of the ills affecting the twentieth century, scorning the prevailing myth of progress, denouncing the oppression of women, and calling for an instauration equivalent to a rediscovery of the elemental virtues of the feminine: love, co-operation, humility before nature, the sanctity of the private self; the hallowing of life - against the death-principle of the dangerously arbitrary male will; its aggression, possessiveness, greed, rationalism and predatory hubris.

This kind of social analysis is itself heavily problematic. But as the twentieth century draws to a close and familiar diagnoses of our ills become superannuated, variations of Graves' critique have found their way into much feminist polemic of the past decade, suggesting that, at the very least, he anticipated a movement of feeling dissatisfied with older analyses of women's predicament. No longer are many women content to pursue equality with men. Rather, something of a rediscovery of female identity, magic, and mystic solidarity with one another and with nature is taking place. Whether this will finally be interpreted as the return of the Goddess or as another, subtler form of male oppression, there is no denying its vigour, or its debt to a basically mythical account of the human condition.

Notes to Chapter 5

1. W.B. Yeats, "The Phases of the Moon", Collected Poems, p. 182.
2. Robert Graves, "To Lucia at Birth", Collected Poems, p. 134.
3. Robert Graves, Collected Poems (1914-1947) (London, 1948), p. 220.
4. Collected Poems, p. 137.
5. The use and connotations of "royally" in Graves' poetry are explored effectively by Kohli, op. cit. p. 77n.
6. The allusion to Job was first noted by Mehoke, op. cit. p. 148.
7. The White Goddess, p. 397.
8. Goodbye To All That, p. 260.
9. The White Goddess, p. 343.
10. Ibid p. 343.
11. Ibid p. 343.
12. Erich Neumann (trans. R.F.C. Hull), The Origins and History of Consciousness (New York, 1964), p. 24.
13. C. Kerényi, Essays on a Science of Mythology (New York, 1963), pp. 7-8.
14. Collected Poems, p. 157. This poem originally appeared with the title "In Dedication" in The White Goddess (London, 1948), n. pag., and in all subsequent editions.
15. Robert Graves, "The White Goddess", Steps: Stories, Talks, Essays Poems, Studies in History (London, 1958), pp. 22-23.
16. Collected Poems, p. 158.
17. Ibid p. 166.
18. Ibid p. 176.
19. The White Goddess, p. 322.
20. Kirkham, op. cit. p. 210, makes only a preliminary, inconsequential reference to the original. Vickery's very weak reading, op. cit. pp. 89-91, makes no reference to the original ballad, despite his stated interest in the mythology.
21. The White Goddess, p. 322.
22. Ibid p. 323.
23. Ibid p. 323.
24. W.B. Yeats, "Byzantium", Collected Poems, p. 280.
25. Sigmund Freud (trans. Joan Riviere), "The Uncanny", Collected

Papers Vol 4 (London, 1950), pp. 391, 394.

26. Collected Poems, p. 170.
27. The White Goddess, p. 186.
28. The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 115.
29. Oxford Addresses On Poetry, p. 60.
30. The White Goddess, p. 476.
31. Robert Graves, "The Pastoral", The Common Asphodel, p. 51.
32. The White Goddess, p. 482.
33. Robert Graves, "Poetry and Politics", The Common Asphodel, p. 281.
34. Ibid, "Introduction", p. X.
35. Ibid p. X.
36. Poetic Unreason, p. 24.
37. Robert Graves, "The Ghost of Milton", The Common Asphodel, p. 320.
38. Ibid, p. 321.
39. Ibid p. 321.
40. Ibid p. 321.
41. The White Goddess, p. 481.
42. The Common Asphodel, p. 321.
43. Ibid p. 321.
44. Ibid p. 322n.
45. Robert Graves, "How Poets See", The Common Asphodel, p. 295.
46. Ibid p. 302.
47. Ibid p. 303.
48. The White Goddess, p. 142.
49. Ibid p. 316.
50. The Common Asphodel, p. 305.
51. Though I would not give my unreserved support to the vastly complex and abstruse deconstructionist theories of influence pioneered by Harold Bloom, I cannot resist the conclusion that there is much to be learned from his conflict models in relation to problems of poetic practice that afflict the mythopoeic mode.
See Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A General Theory of Poetry (New York, 1973). Bloom's younger followers, who are increasingly known as 'Transumptive' critics, have developed his ideas in ways

which have a direct bearing upon the struggle to possess certain resources of figural language evident in much of Graves' work. See Angus Fletcher, Allegory: the theory of a symbolic mode (New York, 1982).

52. John Hollander and Frank Kermode (eds), The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: The Literature of Renaissance England (London, 1973), p. 705.

53. Robert Graves, "The Crowning Privilege", The Crowning Privilege, p. 17.

54. Ibid, p. 33.

55. Ibid, p. 37.

56. Ibid pp. 86-110.

57. The White Goddess, p. 69.

58. The Crowning Privilege, p. 86.

59. Ibid p. 86.

60. Ibid p. 87.

61. Grant, op. cit. pp. 149-50.

62. The Crowning Privilege, p. 88.

63. Ibid p. 90. This argument finds some support from the theories of René Girard, op. cit. See, in particular, his chapter entitled "Dionysus", pp. 119-43.

64. The Crowning Privilege, p. 88.

65. Ibid p. 88.

66. Ibid pp. 92-93.

67. Ibid p. 108.

68. Ibid p. 97.

69. Ibid p. 108.

70. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Selected Essays, 3rd ed. (London, 1951), p. 19.

71. The Crowning Privilege, p. 121.

72. Robert Graves, Poetic Craft and Principle (London, 1967), p. 147.

73. Robert Graves, "The Dedicated Poet", Oxford Addresses on Poetry, pp. 1-27.

74. Ibid p. 10.

75. Ibid p. 11.

76. Ibid p. 12.
77. Ibid p. 12.
78. Ibid p. 11.
79. The White Goddess, p. 476.
80. The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 17.
81. Oxford Addresses on Poetry, p. 13.
82. Robert Graves, Poems About Love (London, 1966), Preface.
83. Oxford Addresses on Poetry, p. 13.
84. Ibid p. 12.
85. Ibid p. 12. See also The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 54.
86. Oxford Addresses on Poetry, p. 12. This whole passage is a remarkably prescient anticipation of so-called 'second-wave' feminism, which has indeed sought to revive the notion of woman's magical powers and primal bond with nature and the cycles of creativity. See Eisenstein, op. cit., especially her chapter entitled "Spinning, Sparking and the Innocence of women", pp. 107-16.
87. Oxford Addresses on Poetry, p. 111.

Chapter 6: The Black Goddess: Transformation and the Release from Bondage

Dionysus, Hercules and the Great Wheel

Graves' allegiance to an essentially magical account of human nature, expressed in a myth which offers a basically tragic perspective on personal destiny and human history, takes us back to the ambivalence of myth explored in Chapter 2. Against the background of the complex functioning of community, myth can be seen to exercise a deeply conservative influence, its responsibility to integrate groups and individuals into a symbolic order of relationships and purposes which it both reifies and mediates. Accounting for myth by way of this kind of explanation - one of the tasks of anthropology - in no way reduces myth to the pejorative value-judgements or second-order categories of sociology. It merely affirms the human need for transcendence, the need to locate the individual within a diachronic and synchronic network of meanings which, in turn, should disclose a rich and satisfying pattern to existence. The undeniable power of myth, the radiant cora which is revealed in story, ceremony, ritual, draws the individual into a dimension where consciousness is expanded to include participation in the past and the future. Myth homologates community by binding together the living, the dead and the unborn in a shared identity which seeks always a point of origin or destination outwith the crowded sphere of history. Even materialist analyses of myth must seek explanations of its influence which take seriously the power of its vast interplay of motifs to move and give depth to the human subject; its overriding drive towards transformation, a principle which turns the natural into the human. If the primary purpose of myth is to negotiate the symbolic relationship between nature and culture in order to optimize the power of human societies over the environments in which they live, then it is also true, as the late Victor Turner used to maintain, that the process can only

be grasped, in its full existential force, from the inside!¹ The mysterium tremendum et fascinans must be affirmed before we can probe the enigmatic experience, somewhere between community and power, that it is the function of myth to articulate.

However, it is also clear that to enter into the realm of myth in this way is to encounter another, more troubling vector in the experience of myth. The eighteenth-century syncretists who struggled with the awesome burden of pagan tradition did so with an intellectual endeavour shored up by Enlightenment confidence and Christian conviction.² Yet into their work crept the shadow of a darker response to pagan antiquity, one founded upon the specious learning of Rosicrucians, Freemasons, Swedenborgians and irrationalists of all kinds, overladen with their secret doctrines and the manic pursuit of a lost wisdom thought to be magically enshrined in the teachings of the ancients. Beneath the surface of respectable Enlightenment scholarship lurked a mystical fascination with mythology which strayed frequently into irrationalism and heresy. This tension between surface and depths can be duplicated, as I laboured to show in Chapter 2, for almost any phase in the natural history of mythology. There is always this dark, chthonic underside to the operations of mythology, which returns whenever human cultures move through periods of doubt or crisis. It may give rise to a renewed sense of imaginative possibility, or it may menace the achievements of civilization with the chaotic, subversive forces of the unconscious. The value-judgement placed upon it varies according to the conditions in which it is received and the imaginative predisposition of those individuals alert to its resurgence.

Robert Graves continued throughout his career to see the twentieth-century's revival of interest in myth as a potentially liberating experience, one which answered his own psychic needs and which called

into question the whole spiritual legacy of industrial civilization. But this drew him inexorably towards the antinomian, irrational properties of myth, as he sought to formulate a vision which would valorize his own life experiences and at the same time provide him with a model for understanding the dilemmas of the age in which he was living. In Graves' scheme, the irrational, unconscious impulse within mythology, and the magical definition of the self which is its corollary, are not to be feared precisely because they challenge the hegemony of reason and expose the fraudulent claims of a bankrupt civilization. Such a stance gambles everything upon the alleged authenticity of its vision, and stands to lose almost as much as it gains by appealing to the eminently 'reasonable' and increasingly scientific disciplines of psychology and anthropology as vehicles for a renewed understanding of the role of myth within culture and community. Graves' willingness to face up to the bleak realities of contemporary history is not in question, as the previous chapter made clear. But the challenge of Apollo, the God of Reason, to the anthropological claims of the single poetic theme drives back the boundaries of his argument until we are brought close to a kernel of beliefs which appears, again and again, to constitute the imaginative core from which mythopoesis is generated from epoch to epoch.

The most powerful modern assertion of the autonomy of myth, and its superiority to reason, was Nietzsche's dialectic of Dionysus and Apollo, which presented the most astringent opposition between instinct and reason, nature and culture, to offer itself to the modern imagination.³ Graves' hostility to the sovereignty of the Apollo-principle bears a strong family resemblance to Nietzsche's romantic primitivism, and is taken up polemically in his poetry, and in his prose speculations, with the intention of confirming the validity of the Dionysiac experience. The single poetic theme co-opts the

figure of Dionysus for reasons similar to Nietzsche's, but its mythopoeic pattern outdistances Nietzsche's by the assimilation of Dionysus to the anthropological structure of The White Goddess, and by the presentation of the god as an embodiment of the poet-victim who must suffer willingly at the hands of the Triple Muse.

We have seen that in the shamanistic traditions of the Pythagoreans and Orphics, the primal sin of humanity was the slaying and eating of the boy-god Dionysus by our accursed ancestors the Titans.⁴ The ambivalence of this myth lies in the realisation that the primal event simultaneously conferred guilt and divinity upon the human race. The function of the mysteries was to purge the guilt and liberate the divinity. Their ceremonial formulae rested upon the assumption of man's essentially magical and alien nature, which was regarded as fundamentally estranged from the cosmos through which it variously laboured. The principle of liberation in Graves' scheme is also bound up, in part, with a process of identifying and communing with the sparagmos Dionysus.

However, his search for a magical vision of the dying and rising god which overcomes the confines of reason takes Graves back into another traditional sphere of mythology, that which tries to discern religious secrets and the preservation of chthonic practices lurking behind the lineaments of narrative. We saw this approach at work in the response of many thinkers to the survival of pagan religion in the middle ages.⁵ Graves' speculations are still more deeply attached to the notion of a secret mystical tradition informing the religious doctrines of primitive peoples.

Drawing heavily upon the researches of the renowned mycologists Mr and Mrs R.G. Wasson, with whom he was personally acquainted, Graves tries to show, in some of his later writings, that the Dionysian ceremonies and doctrines of antiquity were closely tied to the ritual

eating of certain hallucinogenic mushrooms, which played a central role, he argues, in the mystery religions of the ancient world. "The Poet's Paradise",⁶ an essay published just as his tenure as Oxford's Professor of Poetry was coming to an end, exhibits most of the syncretic qualities of Graves' mature mythographic speculations, advancing a theoretical model with enormous explanatory power wedded to the self-verifying insights of personal experience. This is one of Graves' favourite procedures. After describing the main features of the paradisaical myths of the world's major religions, including those of antiquity, Christianity, Islam, and even the witch-cult of northern Europe, Graves goes on to show how these myths correspond to altered states of perception induced by certain hallucinogenic mushrooms. The argument is not as weird as it at first appears. The original suggestions made by Wasson have since found extensive support in the work of Roger Heim, on the role of intoxicants in the Pre-Columbian religions of Latin America,⁷ and in the theories of John Allegro, one of the leading authorities on the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁸ Recently, the writer Rogan Taylor has made an important contribution to the field in his research on the part played by these mushrooms in the shamanism of the remote European peoples such as the Lapps and Aleuts.⁹

The connection with shamanism is an important one, not only because it underlines the antiquity of these bizarre religious practices, which, if Taylor is correct, reach back to the last Ice Age, but also because it serves to highlight the affinity of Graves' thought with the shamanistic traditions explored in Chapter 2. The inclusion of these theories of artificial intoxication in the overall persuasive scheme of the single poetic theme further emphasises the dichotomy in Graves' thought between reason and irrationalism, the conscious and the unconscious. The sacramental consumption of psilocibe or amanita muscaria, rites in which Graves has himself participated,

in the ceremonies of the Mazatek Indians of Mexico,¹⁰ are seen to be a means of liberating the magical self from the bonds of a circumscribing consciousness. The close proximity of this state to the freedom of poetic inspiration again highlights the opposition between poetry and the ratiocinative processes of the intellect:

The perfect sensory control which I could enjoy, confirmed, by analogy, my lifelong faith in the poetic trance: a world where words come to life and combine, under the poet's supra-conscious guidance, into inevitable and true rhythmic statements.¹¹

The 'supra-consciousness' of poetry is identified with the spiritual enlightenment which follows from the ritual consumption of the sacred mushroom. The qualities uniting poetry and religious revelation are further annealed by Graves' desire to associate them with a mythological figure who typifies the fate of the beloved victim, the fate common to both the dedicated poet and the god whose lot it is to suffer the love and the caprice of the Great Goddess. In a sense, Graves choice is inevitable, because of his basic loyalty to the shamanistic account of man's origins and destiny:

The sole European deity known to have matched Tlaloc in these respects was Dionysus. Born as a serpent-crowned child from the Earth-goddess Semele, whom a flash of lightning had impregnated, he went through a variety of transformations, was then torn to shreds and eaten by the Titans, but restored to life by his grand-mother, the Goddess Rhea Creatrix of the world; possessed of an underwater retreat in the grottoes of the Sea-goddess Thetis; and assisted at the chief Greek Mysteries under the protection of goddesses.¹²

The life-cycle of Dionysus, and the cult built up around it, rely upon the ritual use of the sacred mushroom "amanita muscaria, which induces hallucinations, senseless rioting, prophetic sight, erotic energy and remarkable muscular strength."¹³ The cult repeats

the basic mythological leitmotif of secrecy by hiding the use of hallucinogens behind the public, exoteric use of the lesser intoxicant, wine: "the mystagogues withheld the sacred hallucinogenic agent until sure of a candidate's worthiness; he received bread and wine only, symbols of the Grain-Dionysus and the Wine-Dionysus."¹⁴ Secrecy is of paramount significance in the theory because it reiterates the disjunction between appearance and reality, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, that we have seen elsewhere to be a singular feature of mythological thought. The poet, in Graves' aesthetic, is essentially a mystagogue initiating the reader into the cult of the White Goddess, a cult followed anonymously by everyone who experiences heterosexual love. Dionysus is an appropriate self-dramatisation for the poet because he combines the roles of lover, son and victim, and is the central cultic figure in a ritual which releases imagination from the confines of rational awareness into 'supra-consciousness'. Moreover, the widespread presence of his cult extends the experience beyond the parameters of a merely personal vision, to embrace the religious heritage of a whole culture. This centrality of Dionysus to a reality which unites individual feeling and communal participation with the cycles of nature is effectively conveyed in the etymology Graves offers of the crucial word 'mystery':

The meaning of the Greek word mysterion ('mystery') is disputed, but since the mysteries were an autumnal festival complementary to the spring anthesterion, and since this means 'flower-springing', mysterion may well mean myko-sterion, or 'mushroom-springing.'¹⁵

The etymology places the sacred mushroom, and the god Dionysus, at the heart of the religio-poetic inspiration that animates the single poetic theme.

However, the theory is not a new departure in Graves' mythography.

It simply fulfils certain tendencies towards self-dramatisation present in The White Goddess and presages further metamorphoses to come in the later writings. Dionysus is an effective embodiment of the beloved victim, whether he be regarded as poet or as god, because his cult synthesizes many diverse aspects of the dying-and-rising-god motif, the central protagonist of the one story. His mythological life-cycle, and the series of doctrines derived from it by the mystagogues, unite several experiences which we have seen to be seminal in Graves' writings: the syncretic impulse, which resolves many narratives into one narrative; the willing acceptance of violent death; the participation mystique of ritual, when individuality is subsumed into a collective identity; the transport to ecstasy, which reveals a unity to life and nature unapproachable through the categories of reason.

It seems, too, that the ancients themselves were aware of the powerfully syncretic properties of the Dionysus myth. In some versions of the story - including, as we shall see, the one that Graves finally adopts - the poet-priest Orpheus is an incarnation of Dionysus, and his death recapitulates the Titans' dismemberment of the newly-born, horned god. Each year at the summer solstice the priests of the Dionysiac rites re-enacted this murder in the omophagia, their highest mystery, by tearing a bull apart and eating its flesh raw. Various horned animals, representing the god's metamorphoses in this struggle to escape the Titans sometimes replaced the Thracian bull in other Greek lands. The Cretans substituted a wild goat and merged the ceremony with the cult of Zagreus. Wherever a stag was used, Dionysus became confused with Actaeon.¹⁶ These are the properties that make Dionysus the ideal candidate for the role of the sacred year-god whose secret name is hidden, according to Graves, in the vowel-sequence of the BLN alphabet; the divine wonder-child who "can unfold the

secrets of the unhewn dolmen...

This Child is represented by the sacred threshold of the dolmen, the central triad of vowels, namely O.U.E. But one must read O.U.E. backwards, the way of the sun, to make sense of it. It is the sacred name of Dionysus, EUO, which in English is usually written 'EVOE'.¹⁷

Graves' echoes, but also amplifies, Nietzsche in presenting Dionysus as the most perfect representative of the chthonic, atavistic element in myth. He is the god who most fully adumbrates the fate of the poet-victim, destined to be slaughtered and devoured time after time, in the endless cycle of his dealings with the Goddess. His ritual unites the personal experience of the dedicated poet and the communal experience of tribe intoxicated to the point of total unity with nature. Graves quotes approvingly Plutarch's summary of the doctrines of the Orphics:

In describing the manifold changes of Dionysus into winds, water, earth, stars and growing plants and animals, they use the riddling expressions 'render asunder' and 'tearing limb from limb.' And they call the god 'Dionysus' or 'Zagreus' ('the torn') or 'The Night Sun' or 'The Impartial Giver', and record various Destructions, Disappearances, Resurrections and Rebirths, which are their mythographic account of how those changes came about.¹⁸

"The Ambrosia of Dionysus and Semele",¹⁹ the penultimate poem of the trilogy of volumes, Man Does, Woman Is,²⁰ is an address to Dionysus, "Little slender lad, toad-headed," by the poet in the guise of initiate. Ambrosia, Graves elsewhere informs us, is simply a euphemism for various hallucinogenic liquors brewed from mushrooms by the ancient Greeks.²¹ Recalling his own experience of consuming the drug, he notes that

The experience lasted for four and a half hours, and began with the usual lowering of temperature which gave me, as it has given others, an illusion

of going under water. If in a state of grace, one visits Paradise; if not, one wishes one had never been born.²²

The various visions to which the drug gives rise are, it seems, directly attributable to certain physiological changes it induces. Graves is frank in his recognition of this fact, but it does not violate the intentionality of the experience celebrated in the poem:

...entranced I wander
Gorged with your bitter flesh,
Drunk with your Virgin Mother's lullaby.

The hallucination can be regarded as enlightenment only because the poet has to hand the myth of Dionysus with which to make sense of it. The truth-value is in no way compromised by recognition of the vision's physiological origins. Hence the initiate can be borne either to heaven or to hell depending upon his predisposition, and his dedication to a myth which carefully mediates to him, and interprets for him, the changes affecting his body and mind.

It is clear from the theme of the poem that the sacrament of the sacred mushroom has been fully assimilated, in Graves' thought, to the monomyth of the White Goddess. Consuming the "bitter flesh" of the ritually dismembered Dionysus imparts to the poet, as it did to the murderous Titans, a portion of the god's divinity, which awakens the poet to his magical alienation from the "factitious universe"²³ of the Allfather. He is conveyed symbolically to the heart of the year-god's grotto to acquire illumination. But in Graves' version of the Dionysiac mysteries "Dionysus seems still to have been subservient to Demeter and Persephone."²⁴ The ambrosia belongs as much to Semele as it does to her son, and the year-god's grotto is more properly understood as the Great Goddess' "invisible bower of stars."

Gentle her voice, her notes come linked together
In intricate golden chains paid out...

O, whenever she pauses, my heart quails
Until the sound renews.

In this case, the myth precedes the ritual. Graves' dedication to the Triple Muse organizes his vision in such a way as to displace Dionysus from the centre of interest. Dionysus is simply another avatar of the poet himself; his cult is not an end in itself, but simply a means of expressing submission to the Goddess. Once again, Graves has taken an archaic tradition and subtly revised it to accommodate the single poetic theme:

Little slender lad, little secret god,
Pledge her your faith in me,
Who have ambrosia eaten and yet live.

This capacity of the single poetic theme to draw disparate narratives into its field of influence and redeploy them according to specific hermeneutical principles is central to Graves' procedure as a mythographer. The White Goddess presents a great, if fragmented, vision of the Lunar Muse. But the resolution of these fragments into a single image, the means of re-reading them in such a way as to re-establish coherence, depends upon the will of the poet reaching out to motifs, symbols, names and stories embedded in myths which, as The Greek Myths makes clear, are often derivative, garbled, deliberately confused.

Graves is not content with unfolding the mystical significance of the various Dionysus stories. It is essential that he reinscribe at their heart the outline of the Great Goddess who presides over all authentic myths. The primordial Ur-myth which lies behind all narratives contains only one story with three protagonists: the Muse, her poet and his rival or second self or weird. Dionysus is a richly-symbolic representative of the victim figure. But even he cannot embody fully the breadth of the poet's experience in his dealings

with the Goddess. To his devotees he conveys effectively the pain and violence and transience of the victim figure. But he fails to give an adequate account of the poet's singlemindedness, his dedication and his pride, and, therefore, must yield to a mythological character who does:

Plutarch carefully distinguishes Apollo (Hercules as god) from Dionysus (Hercules as demi-god). This Apollo never dies, never changes his shape; he is eternally young, strong and beautiful. Dionysus perpetually changes...into an infinity of shapes.²⁵

The figure who gradually emerges from the textual interplay of The White Goddess, and its associated corpus of poems, to become the fullest mythological self-dramatisation of the poet-lover is Hercules, whom Graves describes as "the most perplexing character in Classical mythology."²⁶ Approximately one third of The White Goddess is given over to an analysis of the Hercules figure in Greek mythology, an endeavour justified because, according to Graves, Hercules is the purest archetype of the Muse's beloved victim, embracing the roles of sacred king, culture hero, valiant lover, wonder-child, shaman and Spirit of the Waxing Year. These are united, in the Hercules persona, to the drama of the poet's development, the growing self-awareness which accompanies dealings with the Muse, propelling the poet towards an increasingly mythical understanding of his tragic destiny. The poet becomes Hercules, inescapably re-enacting the hero's cycle of adventures, and acquiring the characteristics of pride, defiance, endurance and submission which mark him off as the beloved.

Interpreted historically, the manifold texts of the Hercules myth can be reduced to the basic narrative of "the typical sacred king of early Hellenic Greece, consort of a tribal nymph, the Moon-goddess incarnate; his twin Iphicles acted as his tanist."²⁷ In its earliest

form, the myth is simply a variation of Gilgamesh epic, with references to a sacred bride, a beloved comrade, a harrowing of hell, the slaying of lions, and the quest for a magical herb that is "connected with the progress of the sun around the Zodiac."²⁸ His famous Labours, originally thirteen in number, correspond to the progress of this Hercules "through a thirteen month year";²⁹ suggesting that he might plausibly be identified with an extremely primitive culture hero found throughout the substrata of Indo-European folklore, an aboriginal god of the earliest planter peoples of the New Stone Age, the first to mark out a rudimentary lunar calendar.³⁰

Some of the labours are indeed valuable records of incidents or 'dramatic highlights' in the reign of the sacred king. Several clearly belong to the marriage-task motif, by which the candidate secures dominion over each season of the year by conquering its symbolic animal, and, in so doing, wins the hand of the nymph-priestess or Goddess' representative. 'Heracles'' ritual combat with the lion is important in this respect, if only because his Nemean lion-skin became so identifiably a part of his image. Graves notes that bull, lion, boar and watersnake "appear to be the beasts which Heracles fought."³¹

Heracles' taking of the flayed skin for a garment and, indeed, for an emblem, is one of the surest indicators of his origin and function. For

At Thebes, Heracles' native city, the Sphinx-goddess ruled a two-seasoned year; she was a winged lioness with a serpent's tail; hence, he wore a lion pelt and mask, rather than a bull mask like Minos.³²

Behind the obvious totemism of the lion-clad sacred king, who is also both priest and shaman,³³ there lie important clues to the nature of the association of the poet and the divine victim in Graves' work.

The wearing of the lion skin expresses the approval by the local Goddess of her chosen lover as representative of the God of the Waxing Year. Heracles' sponsorship by the Theban incarnation of the Great Goddess accounts for his very name, which means 'Beloved of Hera'. He wears the skin as a sign of his identity, as a token of the brief dominion he has gained as Year God, and as a reminder of the love he has, for a while, won from her. But even in the moment of his triumph, with the donning of the skin, he confirms his submission to the design understood and controlled by the woman. Read iconotopically, the moment is dominated by "...Hera the Lion-goddess of Mycenae and her partner...the sacred king who is due to die under the midsummer sign of Leo, emblemized by a knife in the Egyptian Zodiac."³⁴

The icons which best typify the relation of poet-victim to Muse-Goddess, ones which have been found in several locations in Greece, show either the Goddess riding a lion, or the Goddess standing astride two lions. In the first posture she expresses her sovereignty over the hero, whom she rides from his election until his death. In the second she symbolizes her equal devotion to the twin gods, over whom she has dominion, and between whom she alternates affection.³⁵ Having subdued a lion figure in the ritual combat which delivers up to him the temporary sovereignty of the year, Heracles is made ready for his sacrificial death when the sun enters Leo. It is at that point that the Goddess takes his life and sets up his tanist in office, in the manner most clearly expounded in the story of Blodeuwedd and Goronwy's betrayal of Llew Llaw Gyffes, 'the Lion with the Steady Hand'.³⁶

It is in his late essay "Intimations of the Black Goddess" that Graves finally confirms the identification of the poet and the solar hero when he writes "Ishtar, Queen of Babylon, was originally Virgin of

the Zodiac, who appears on steles, naked and riding a lion, the poet's Zodiacal sign."³⁷ The reference is followed by another poem from the Man Does, Woman Is trilogy, "Lion Lover",³⁸ in which the poet speaks in the persona of a Hercules-like hero-figure proclaiming his commitment to his role in the face of cruelty, rejection and "despair":

You chose a lion to be your lover -
Me, who in joy such doom greeting
Dared jealously undertake
Cruel ordeals long foreseen and known,
Springing a trap baited with flesh: my own.

It is clear that the meeting of man and animal in the figure of the shaman-poet permits free passage between the human recognition of the poet's joyfully-affirmed "doom", "long foreseen and known", and the bestial reliance upon instinct and passion. The lion lover copes with his fate, and with the torments of the Muse's caprice, by resorting to extremities of emotion. Hence the diction of the poem is dominated by descriptions of emotional intensity: jealousy, "cruel ordeals", fury, "despair". This brand of Herculean madness, which transforms the poet-hero into a wild-man is depicted as a necessary outcome of love, the obverse of the calm benediction which accompanies love's certitude.

In shamanistic tradition, by donning an animal's skin and imitating its behaviour, one acquires a means of becoming more than human. It is not a question of reverting to a simple animal existence: the animal in question is already vested with a mythology. By becoming this animal, the shaman becomes something more powerful than himself.³⁹ The lion lover refuses to "exchange this lion heart/For a less furious other" because it is his identification with the mythical beast which enables him to transcend merely human responses and values. He is caught up in a drama the apparent torments and brutalities of which signal his participation in an experience beyond the capacity of

most men to comprehend. What appears as a bestial degradation is, in fact, the elevation of the elite consciousness of the poet to the plain which only those possessed of magical awareness can inhabit: the poet, the shaman, the hero. The transvaluation of emotion which occurs is beyond the normal categories of assessment: "Gratitude and affection I disdain/As cheap in any market". The lion lover welcomes pain, despair, the losses and gains of love as part of the exaltation of serving the Triple Muse. The Hercules who held briefly the world-burden of Atlas the Titan, who is simply another version of himself, has become part of that myth of endurance inscribed in the word-root TAL or TLA, and can surely claim to have "Dared jealously undertake" the perilous role of the poet-lover.⁴⁰

The syncretic powers of Graves' mythography, and the gift it possesses for welding together poetry and biography, are exemplified in the discussion of the three versions of Hercules, contained in The White Goddess. Each version affords the poet a repertoire of motifs and stories from which to dramatise the evolution of his vocation, and his growing understanding of "the pathology of poetic composition."⁴¹

The first Heracles was, according to Graves, a pastoral king of nomadic shepherd communities. His origins can be traced back to paleolithic times. He appeared as a rugged mountain-man, clad in animal skins and carrying an oak club. The pattern of this Heracles' life-story constitutes the earliest deposit of narrative material upon which the single poetic theme was built. But it can be retrieved only through the palimpsest of the Classical records:

...he is a miraculous child born in a shower of gold (42)...as a young man he is the undefeated monster-slayer of his age...willingly undertakes the world-burden of the giant Atlas...is betrayed by his lovely bride...flays himself...climbs in agony to the top of Mount Oeta; fells and splits an oak for his own pyre; is consumed; flies up to heaven...in the form of an eagle...and is introduced by the Goddess of Wisdom into the company

of the Immortals.⁴³

Autobiography and myth interweave throughout this passage, intersecting at important points in order to assimilate Graves' story to the "one story". Infantile fantasy, warfare, sexual betrayal and self-immolation unite Heracles' biography to significant incidents in Graves' biography, as the mythic narratives are progressively sifted to provide a basic plot and a set of symbols through which the poet's self-understanding can be advanced.

The ritual background to the pastoral Heracles provides some of the most persistent material in the later myths and coordinates this Heracles with the pastoral realm that is the setting for Graves' love-and nature-poetry. His locus amoenus is the sacred forest which he shares with his consort, the Queen of the Woods, and his twelve companions or 'merry men'. At the time of his midsummer sacrifice to the Queen, his merry men crucify and then devour him, conveying his head and genitals to an oracular islet, and then returning to install his tanist as king.⁴⁴ This is the basic version of the cultus which Graves believes persisted into medieval times in the form of the witch-cult.⁴⁵ It is also related to his own preference for the pastoral realm as the setting for the drama of poetic love.

The second Heracles is a mutation of the first brought about by the transition from a purely pastoral to an agrarian and settled way of life. This Heracles is essentially a barley-god, and appears iconographically with the lion skin, the club, and with grain sprouting from his shoulders. He bears a far stronger resemblance to the hero of the Zodiacal Labours and marriage-tasks than does the first Heracles, though he remains intimately bound up with service and sacrifice to the Great Goddess.⁴⁶

It is to this Hercules that belongs Graves' first poem where he openly

identifies himself with the sacred king. "Hercules At Nemea"⁴⁷ mines the same seam of lion imagery as the much later "Lion Lover". But the references are more esoteric, and call for more of the incunabula of the theme to be taken up into the poem:

Muse, you have bitten through my fool's finger.
Fierce as a lioness you seized it
In your white teeth most amorously;
And I stared back, dauntless and fiery-eyed,
Challenging you to maim me for my pride.

Regardless of the mythological references, we can judge from the context that any Muse's "mark" which consists of the brutal severing of the lover's finger is intended to convey the ambivalence of her favour. To be marked thus is to be given a foretaste of the pain which her favour entails. Her lover is called upon to display the utmost courage and self-assurance, but he must recognize that he will nonetheless become her victim. Graves, in fact, does have an injury on his right hand received during the Great War which corresponds exactly to the ritual maiming given the chosen hero.⁴⁸

It appears that the dominant emotion which governs the midsummer consort is "pride". Nemean Hercules, as Spirit of the Waxing Year, embodies the qualities of virility, strength, courage and "exultation", cognate with the vitality of the summer season and the burgeoning fertility of nature. Raised to the mythological status of the lion-beast he has overcome, the shaman-poet joyfully affirms the mythological pattern of love and violence which transforms the otherwise random elements of biography into the radiant narrative of myth. Every significant incident in the poet's life-story can be structured according to the principles of the one story, rendering the experiences of the individual as variations on an eternal theme. The poem draws attention to this capacity of myth for investing empirical fact with secret, spiritual meaning in its closing two lines: "Let all Nemea

look and understand/Why you have set your mark on this right hand." The audience of Nemeans or readers can only grasp the significance of Hercules' injury if it is already apprised of the tenets and symbolism of the single poetic theme. Therefore these closing lines invite the monomyth into the form of the poem in order to ensure that the observer might "look" upon the ritual injury and "understand" its deeper significance. One of the laws of mythology is that nothing is accidental. Armed with the knowledge of the single poetic theme, the reader discerns an apparently arbitrary event as part of a hugely significant pattern. The problem with inviting this kind of perception is one closely related to the deeper ambiguities of all mythological discourse. Without the consoling backdrop of the theme, a biography which has continually aspired to the condition of myth is suddenly emptied of meaning, its 'story' reduced to a series of senseless episodes punctuated by violence, cruelty, concupiscence, perfidy and a sado-masochistic submission to the figure of the Terrible Mother.⁴⁹ "Hercules at Nemea" risks almost as much as it gains in concluding its address to the Muse with an invitation to make clear her purposes.

In his description of the struggle between Heracles and the Nemean Lion, Graves writes: "The lion bit off one of his fingers; but, holding its head in chancery, Heracles squeezed hard until it choked to death."⁵⁰ The explanation of the incident given in The White Goddess carries us straight to the heart of the religious mysteries inscribed upon the calendar alphabet.⁵¹ The BLN was frequently set down as a finger-alphabet, with each letter assigned a station at a particular finger-joint. It is vitally important that the finger Hercules loses is his middle-or fool's-finger because this is the finger on which the arrangement of letters spells out the fate of the tanist who shall succeed Hercules at his midsummer sacrifice. In other words,

it is a reassurance to Hercules of his eventual triumph over the
 tanist.

Graves also notes that, in what he terms "a mystical Celto-Iberian sense",⁵² the fate of Hercules comes to be bound up with another important aspect of the alphabetical secret of the ancients. The third version of Hercules whom he identifies, Hercules Canopus or Celestial Hercules, was regarded by the learned academies of Greece and Ireland (where he became known as "Ercwlf") as the creator of the alphabet and as the true hero of the story it enshrined. This third Hercules came to assimilate the characteristics of earlier divinities, including Dionysus and Apollo. In Ireland he was equated with the Sun-god Ogma who was said to have given to men the Ogham tree-alphabet. But Celestial Hercules came to be regarded not as a dying-and-rising demigod, but as a transcendent divinity whose apotheosis had occurred once only:

...the Pillars (of Hercules) are alphabetical
 abstractions. 'Marwnad Ercwlf', an ancient Welsh
 poem...records how Ercwlf raised 'four columns
 of equal height capped with red gold,' apparently
 the four columns of five letters each, which
 formed the twenty-lettered Bardic alphabet known
 as the Boibel Loth. It seems that, about the
 year 400 BC, this new alphabet, the Greek letter-
 names of which referred to Celestial Hercules'
 journey in the sun-goblet...displaced the Beth-
 Luis-Nion tree alphabet, the letter names of
 which referred to the murderous sacrifice of
 Cronus by the wild women.⁵³

The religious revolution documented in the displacement of
 the BLN by the BLF alphabet included as one of its essential features
 the elevation of the year-god to the status of a transcendent divinity,
 no longer subject to the Goddess or to the recurring life-cycle of
 her sacred victim. The calendar-alphabet was reinterpreted as the
 story of the passage of his emblem, the sun, through the sky, from
 day to night and from year's beginning to year's end. The effort

to translate the year-god from the level of a dying-and-rising demigod ritually consumed by his followers, to the plane of abstract divinity where his worship became cerebral and passionless, burdened the mythology of the calendar-alphabet with a hypothesis it could not sustain, and which led to its disintegration. Ironically, this cataclysmic event represented the release from the cycle of the Great Wheel of life, death and rebirth, for which every true poet and king had prayed:

The concentrated essence of Druidic, as of Orphic Greek, philosophy was Rheo, 'I flow away', Gwion's letter-name for R:- 'Panta Rhei', 'all things flow'. The main problem of paganism is contained in Rieuben, the alternative name for R, if this stands for Rymbanao:- 'Must all things swing round again for ever? Or how can one escape from the wheel?' This was the problem of the blinded Sun-hero Samson when he was harnessed to the corn-mill of Gaza; and it should be noted that the term 'corn-mill' was applied in Greek philosophy to the revolving heavens. Samson resolved the problem magnificently by pulling down both posts of the temple so that the roof collapsed upon everyone.⁵⁴

The breakdown of the calendar-alphabet, which occurred with the apotheosis of Celestial Hercules, was a solution to the sufferings of the Great Wheel which, in reality, delivered no legitimate form of release, despite the heroic exertions of Samson. The transition from Dionysus to Hercules Canopus (a figure identical to Apollo) saw the displacement of the chthonic, demigod Spirit of the Year not by an oracular presence who had won his way from the Wheel, but by a transcendent, lotus-borne Sun-god, divorced from the earth and set apart from human activities. From this displacement resulted the triumph of the Allfather and the victory of the God of Reason over the deepest religious instincts of the race.

The letter R is the last letter in the alphabet of Celestial Hercules known as the Boibel-Loth. It is the thirteenth consonant; it has

the elder, the death-tree, as its sacred tree; it covers the period from November 25th to December 22nd, including the winter solstice, when the New Year Child Horus Harpocrates is born to avenge the mid-summer sacrifice and kill the titan. It specifically symbolizes all that we experience as transient in this universe of death, as its greek title, Rheo, 'I flow away', suggests. The riddle of 'Panta Rhei', 'all things flow', cannot be solved within the terms of the artificial Boibel-Loth alphabet because it belonged originally to the sacred king's alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion. The Druids and Orphics knew that in replacing the BLN with the BLF (or their Greek equivalents) the Olympian priesthood had left itself with an impossible metaphysical conundrum: it had articulated a question which, under the Goddess, it had not been necessary to ask, and for which it now had no answer. The Druids and Orphics knew why all things flowed, and offered a solution thought to be self-evident in the cycle which took the sacred king from birth to death to rebirth. The sensation of entropy, of decay, and of mortality had not previously provoked the anxiety out of which such a question arises because, under the tutelage of the Goddess, with its human focus on woman, life had meaning and could be affirmed. Graves' view of the way in which the Orphics responded to the problem of escape from the Wheel shall be outlined later in this chapter.

Samson's reaction to the problem of the Wheel may be understood in a mystical sense along the same lines as the Pillars of Hercules. For Samson is a Semitic Hercules, and his pulling down the pillars of the temple symbolizes his revolt against the imprisonment of the alphabet narrative. Inscribed on the pillars are the consonants of the Boibel-Loth, just as they were on the 'unhewn dolmen', with the vowels written on the lintel. Samson's wrecking of the pillars does destroy the alphabet and release him from his incarceration,

but only at the cost of his, and everyone else's, annihilation. The twin problems of the evanescence of all human realities, and the endlessly-recurring cycle of love and betrayal remain unanswered.

Graves begins his pilgrimage towards the solution to the problem of paganism in a consideration of Druidic reflections upon Hercules. This leads him, in effect, to the contemplation of a fourth version of the hero, even though he declines to name him as such. The syncretic qualities of the single poetic theme enable it to draw continually into its orbit a succession of figures and stories which are systematically aligned and made to correspond to each other and also to the principle features of the poet's biography. The changing, evolving, mutating properties of the theme are nowhere more ably demonstrated than in the development of Graves' understanding and treatment of the Hercules figure. Drawn increasingly in later life to Druidic speculations, Graves began to focus on the Celto-Iberian version of Hercules,

...the lion-skinned god Ogmios: whom the Irish credited with the invention of the alphabet that they 'had out of Spain' and whom Gwion, in his elegy on 'Ercwlf', celebrates as a planter of alphabetic pillars. The people of Tartessus were famous in Classical times for the respect they paid to old men, and Ogmios according to Lucian was represented as an aged Hercules.⁵⁵

This "aged Hercules" is perhaps best understood as a mythological product of the aged Graves' limitless capacity for self renewal. As the "Lion Lover" and Nemean Hercules represented the youthful, vigorous incarnation of the sacred king, so the figure of Ogmios allows Graves to retain his hold on his self-dramatisation as the hero Hercules, while adapting the persona to the changing realities of his life. The single poetic theme evolves with its author, throwing up new mythopoeic possibilities.

In Irish tradition, Ogmia Sun-face is the God of Eloquence, "represented in Celtic art as a mixture of the gods Cronus, Hercules and Apollo"⁵⁶, worshipped by the Druids as a lion-skinned, club-bearing inventor of Letters, god of healing, god of fertility, god of prophecy. To the Latins he was, simply and unequivocally, Ogmian Hercules. A close parallel was Samson, and like Samson he is placed between his two alphabet pillars contemplating the riddle of the Wheel in which he is trapped: "the main problem of paganism."

But Samson's solution to the enigma, though "magnificent", is not that of Ogmios, nor is it consistent with the values of the single poetic theme. The aged Ogmios, who has endured the cycle countless times, views his fate with a certain equanimity, refusing to be cowed by the questions 'Must all things swing round again forever? Or how can one escape from the Wheel?' He refuses to be bound by the fear of death or the terror of transience and loss because he has placed his faith in the redemptive love of the Goddess who eventually sets all her victims free. Only true poets, Graves believes, retain any grasp of how the questions are to be answered. The ability to go on enduring the sorrows of the Wheel itself offers its own reward in the shape of the continuing love of the Muse. But outwith that, to her beloved devotees, the Muse holds out the hope that, beyond the Five Stations - beyond even Repose and Death - there is a mode of being which transcends the categories of ordinary perception and shatters the illusion of the Wheel. Graves makes a wholehearted identification of himself (the poet) with this resolute ethic and with the stance of the ancient Ogmia in a late poem, "To Ogmian Hercules":⁵⁷

Your Labours are performed, your Bye-works too;
Your ashes gently drift from Oeta's peak.
Here is escape then, Hercules, from empire.

On one level, "To Ogmian Hercules" is an old man's poem. The aged Graves identifies himself with the aged Ogma, "a veteran Hercules, with club and lion-skin, drawing crowds of prisoners along with golden chains connected by their ears to the tip of his tongue",⁵⁸ the chains representing the power of eloquence or poetry to bind an audience. It is a quieter, gentler poem than "Hercules at Nemea", perhaps because it takes as its setting the moment when the rigors of the Wheel have ended, and the apotheosis of Hercules has already commenced. The poem continues, however, to exhibit the defiance and resolve we associate with the Hercules figure in Graves' writing, who will, despite his infirmities "Still go armed with club and lion's pelt."

"To Ogmian Hercules" is certainly a product of old age, or of Repose, as Graves would call it, and it even anticipates the final station, Death, in its reflections. But the confidence with which it recalls and organizes the materials of a lifetime - love ("You broke all hearts"), betrayal, even war ("What wars you started let your sons conclude") - refracted through the hermeneutic of the theme, animates it with a faith in life that makes death seem little more than the final stage of growth. It is fascinating to observe that the third line, "Here is escape then, Hercules, from empire", originally appeared upon a plaque above the house occupied by Graves and Riding on Majorca, in 1929.⁵⁹ Then, it spelt out their defiant renunciation of the concerns and opinions of the defunct, predatory culture from which they had withdrawn. In this new context, it represents the poet's yearning for "Rest", his desire to be taken to the embrace of "Lithe Hebe, youngest of all Goddesses,/Who circles on the Moon's broad threshing floor", a deity Graves elsewhere identifies as the supreme Earth-mother, forerunner of Eve.⁶⁰

The "rest" which is sought "on Hebe's lap" is acquired with the aged poet's recognition of some sort of literary immortality, reinforced

by the awareness that there is nothing left to prove. Ogmian Hercules embodied, in Irish myth, the qualities of the wise old man, the ancient culture hero who set statues, ordained customs, healed wounds, subdued enemies, and instituted writing. Graves' attempt to identify the aged poet, and, by implication, himself, with such a culture hero can be understood as an endeavour to show that, in the life-cycle of the poet, there comes a point when he can make the transition from being equated with the virile divine victim to being more readily equated with the Year God as sage and teacher:

Rest your immortal head on Hebe's lap,
 What wars you started let your sons conclude,
 Meditate a new Alphabet, heal wounds,
 Draw poets to you with long golden chains
 But still go armed with club and lion's pelt.

In reality, this is a vivid example of the way in which Graves can enlarge on the basic plot of the one story in order to accommodate changes in his personal development, particularly the hard fact of growing old. The "new Alphabet" which Ogma will "Meditate" incorporates this evolution, and reflects the poet's striving to unearth the secret which might allow him to believe that, beyond the cyclic concept enshrined in the Beth-Luis-Nion, there is a sense of linear progression towards some as yet ill-defined but joyful goal. The combination of cyclic and linear movement produces, of course, the spiral, "prison of all true Kings who ever reigned." The form such an alphabet would take is beyond our, and presumably Ogma's, speculation. Hence, in the final line of the poem, Ogma is seen to reclothe himself defiantly in his traditional emblems, signifying his unaltered commitment to the role of the lover victim, and to the Triple Muse.

Repeatedly, then, in Graves' writings, the persona of Hercules is used to solve problems of poetic logic by the fusion of biography and myth. In many senses, Hercules is the key to understanding the

place of the alphabet secret in Graves' imaginative project. Graves' ambitions are nothing if not high. The White Goddess is described as "a historical grammar of poetic myth". The tree-alphabet, in the midst of which toils the figure of Hercules, forms the basis of the whole edifice of true literature, and without access to its secrets, the poet cannot hope to achieve a complete vision. Over and over again, Graves' preoccupation is with finding a language: a grammar, an alphabet, a trope which he can make his own and which answers to all his needs. Whether it be in the rewriting of precursors or the misreading of religious narratives, the impulse is the same: to recover a vocabulary out of which can be constructed an archetypal story in which the experience of the individual recapitulates, and is validated by, the experience of mankind, and vice versa. The tableau of the hero between the two pillars depicts the poet - Graves himself in effect - bound to the alphabet, the fundamental building blocks of the language through which he will seek to articulate his story. Encoded in the sacred associations of the letters is the secret of his suffering. Without the letters nothing can be made. It is his fate, his duty, to cry "Sing! Heavenly Muse", and produce the work that is both celebration of, and homage to, the Goddess. Language is thus his joy and his burden. Graves' ambivalent response to language as a writer is best understood against the background of the double-edged destiny sealed in the alphabet - the material out of which all poetic utterance is formed.

The Wisdom of Orpheus

The syncretistic religion of the ancients in which the ritual of the suffering god Dionysus met the celestial transcendence of Hercules-Apollo was Orphism. The gradual adoption in Graves' writings of the persona and the myth of Orpheus recapitulates the same

syncretistic process by which the pagan Orphics of antiquity assimilated the cults of Dionysus and Hercules Canopus into the love-feast that was the central feature of their worship, thereby inadvertently initiating the shift from religion to philosophy. The view of Orpheus that emerges in Graves' mature writings is sufficiently idiosyncratic to be attributable primarily to the tensions of the poet's own inner biography, but it is also in part anticipated by the work of the Cambridge Ritualists, especially that of Cornford:

From Dionysus comes the unity of all life, in the cycle of death and rebirth, and the conception of the daemon or collective soul, immanent in the group as a whole, and yet something more than any or all of the members that partake of it. To Orpheus is due the shift of focus from earth to heaven, the substitution for the vivid, emotional experience of the renewal of life in nature, of the worship of a distant and passionless perfection in the region of light, from which the soul, now immortal, is fallen into the body of this death, and which it aspires to regain by the formal observances of asceticism. But the Orphic still clung to the emotional experience of reunion and the ritual that induced it, and, in particular, to the passionate spectacle (theoria) of the suffering God.⁶¹

Cornford also offers some precedent for Graves' view of the disaster which befell Greek religion with the apotheosis of Hercules-Apollo:

As Orphism was a reformation of Dionysiac religion, so Pythagoreanism may be regarded as a further reformation...away from Dionysus, away even from Orpheus, towards Apollo. It is a further movement from emotion towards intellect and reason.⁶²

Graves shares Cornford's basically Nietzschean lament for the demise of the atavistic principle in Greek religion. However, his own transition "...away from Dionysus" is itself vouchsafed by the presence of Orpheus, who is destined to become, in Graves' writings, not simply the final paradigm of the poet-victim, but also the persona through

whom the poet secures his release from the Great Wheel.

We have seen that, in antiquity, the cult of Dionysus the kid became confused with other animal sacrifices, including that of the bull-god Zagreus, and that of Actaeon the stag. Wherever this fusion occurred, the beast was taken to symbolize the infant god slain and eaten by the Titans at the primal scene, that moment which had seen the creation of humanity and the incarceration of the divine pneuma in the Great Wheel of incarnations.⁶³ The officiating priest at these rituals was, according to Graves, a primitive form of the priest-poet-victim, Orpheus; not the lyre-playing prophet of the God of Reason, but an earlier type of mystagogue regarded by his adherents as an incarnation of the God he represented, and, therefore, in a final sense, one with the animal devoured at the omophagia over which he presided:

This Orpheus did not come in conflict with the cult of Dionysus; he was Dionysus, and he played the rude alder-pipe, not the civilized lyre. Thus Proclus (commentary on Plato's Politics: p 398) writes:

Orpheus, because he was the principal in the Dionysian rites, is said to have suffered the same fate as the god.
and Apollodorus (i.3.2) credits him with having invented the Mysteries of Dionysus.⁶⁴

Graves' identification of Orpheus with Dionysus, an idea powerfully supported by the authorities he quotes, is designed to reinforce the correspondence between poet and sacred victim. The same basic insight informs the portrait of Orpheus in the novel The Golden Fleece, which we have already briefly examined.⁶⁵ Orpheus there appears as poet and priest, psychopomp of the secrets of the White Goddess. Even at this comparatively early point in Graves' career, Orpheus is also burdened with knowledge of the fate that awaits all true devotees of the Goddess who submit to the ordeals inscribed in the

cycle of the calendar-alphabet. When Ancaeus asks: "Since to rest well is to sleep, but to rest perfectly is to die, do you then desire death, Orpheus?", Orpheus replies:

"Not even death. We are all caught on a wheel,
from which there is no release but by grace of the
Mother. We are whirled up into life, the light of
day, and carried down again into death, the dark-
ness of night; but then another day dawns red
and we reappear, we are reborn. And a man is not
reborn in his accustomed body but in that of a
bird, beast, butterfly, bat or creeping thing,
according to the judgement passed upon him below.
Death is no release from the wheel, Ancaeus,
unless the Mother should intervene. I sigh for
perfect rest, to be taken at last into her benign
keeping.⁶⁶

This Great Wheel of incarnations is the sacred cycle of the life, birth, death and resurrection of the divine and beloved victim, elsewhere represented in Graves' writings as Dionysus or Hercules. The poet-victim assigned his place within the wheel is offered only the momentary consolation of the love of the Triple Muse, and invited to suffer, and to endure, in the hope that she will once more open to him her inscrutable heart. Labouring through his endlessly-recurring cycle, the poet-hero is left to puzzle out the secret contained in the death-letter, R, of his alphabet: "'Must all things swing round again for ever? Or how can one escape from the Wheel?⁶⁷" This is the same question that vexes Orpheus the argonaut, and it leads inevitably to the prayer uttered in the poem "The Fellow'd Year": "That the twelve spokes of this round-fellow'd year/Be a fixed compass, not a turning wheel."⁶⁸ Orpheus' perception that "We are all caught on a wheel, from which there is no release..." expresses the toiling, shamanistic insight into the magical and alien nature of man's soul which is the fundamental challenge of the Orphics to the heritage of Classical civilization. It is this essential homelessness, the sense of "Geworfenheit",⁶⁹ that binds the Orphic account

of man's soul to Graves' myth of the White Goddess. Just as the myths of Dionysus and Hercules are recruited into the single poetic theme, so the figure of Orpheus, and the yearning for escape which he represents, are recuperated by the symbolism of the life-cycle of the sacred victim. The longing to turn the spokes of the felloed year into the axes of a compass expresses the desire of the poet-victim to rediscover a linear progression somewhere near the heart of his service to the Muse, to find some way of breaking free from the neurotic discourse of the theme, which goes on repeating itself into eternity.

We saw in the mutations of the Hercules figure in Graves' writings, the single poetic theme adapting to the changing needs of the poet without violating the central tenets of the original monomyth. In reworking the myth of Orpheus, Graves embarks on a similar process, exemplifying the subordination of myth to biography. His use of the body of traditions surrounding Orpheus merely reasserts a particular vector of the theme and takes it forward into the altered circumstances of his life and the enlargement of his own self-understanding as a poet. The Orphic symbolism had been utilized, as we have seen, as early as The Golden Fleece, and it is paramount in solving the riddle of the Great Wheel, or what The White Goddess terms "The main problem of paganism":

The Orphics had another, quieter solution and engraved it in cypher on gold tablets tied around the necks of their beloved dead. It was: not to forget, to refuse to drink the water of cypress-shaded Lethe however thirsty one might be, to accept water only from the sacred (hazel-shaded?) pool of Persephone, and thus to become immortal Lords of the Dead, excused further Tearings-To-Pieces, Destructions, Resurrections and Rebirths.⁷⁰

It is the privilege of Orpheus, in The Golden Fleece, to conduct his fellow argonauts through the Great Mysteries of Samothrace, through

which they come to an awareness of the power of the Great Goddess. The purpose is to instruct "them how to behave when they were dead, if they wished to become oracular heroes rather than perennially live out their existence underground as ignorant and twittering shades."⁷¹

The song Orpheus sings at the Mysteries reappears as possibly the most significant of the "Magical Poems" printed in the Collected Poems of 1948: "Instructions to the Orphic Adept".⁷² The form of "Instructions", like the description of the Orphic theology outlined in The White Goddess, is heavily indebted to Jane Harrison's analysis of Orphic eschatology, and to Gilbert Murray's translations of the Timpane Grande and Campagno tablets that accompany Harrison's discussions.⁷³ However, Graves successfully appropriates both the language of the tablets and the speculations of his forebears, and allies them to the single poetic theme by drawing upon the symbolic resources contained in his own interpretation of the myth of Orpheus:

So soon as ever your mazed spirit descends
From daylight into darkness, Man, remember
What you have suffered here in Samothrace,
What you have suffered.

The crucial Orphic injunction, and, indeed, the essence of Orphic wisdom, is contained in these opening lines. The remainder of the poem might be regarded properly as an enlargement of the basic command at the start - to "remember/What you have suffered..." The silent interlocutor of "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" was similarly urged, whilst contemplating the pageant of the sacred king, "Do not forget..."⁷⁴ But, although Juan stood to be 'instructed' in the mysteries of the single poetic theme, he remained essentially a passive observer, caught up in rapture by the tableau of the Goddess, but effectively distanced from her embrace. "Instructions" advances from this position

by addressing its interlocutor as an "Adept", someone expert in the outworkings of the Theme and prepared to participate actively in its deeper mysteries. The stark form of address, "Man", refuses all titles, proving that in the descent "From daylight into darkness" that marks the threshold of the Mysteries all are stripped to the spirit and must face the ensuing trials supported only by the gnosis of their secret destiny.

The purging, redemptive knowledge which, Graves claims, sustains the adept through his sojourn, stems directly from the memory myth that lies at the heart of his work. The overriding urge not to forget began in the sacrificial miseries of the trenches. It found its way into the Theme as part of the beloved victim's sacred compact with the Muse, the impulse which sustained him through the torments of love and the Great Wheel. It issued in the magical tropes of analepsis and prolepsis which released the poet from the terror of mortality and the tyranny of linear time, allowing him to commune freely with past and future. In his later writings, it leads Graves to the ecstatic conclusion that time itself may be an illusion which the heightened intuitions of the poet can abolish:

...cosmic science has done us the service of suggesting that time is no more than a useful terrestrial convention. Instead we are offered a time-space continuum in which the moment of miracle not only has its place but can be endlessly observed from endless points of vantage... Since we are able by miracle to foresee the future and re-create the past, even in our own lifetimes, what more can we ask?75

The great obstacle in the way of his spiritual progress, which the adept must circumvent, is the force antithetical to the redemptive influence of memory: forgetfulness:

To the left hand there bubbles a black spring
Overshadowed with a great white cypress.

Avoid this spring, which is Forgetfulness;
 Though all the common rout rush down to drink,
 Avoid this spring!

The perfectly human and understandable urge to forget past suffering must be resisted if the soul of the poet is to escape the wheel. The cypress is the tree "sacred to Hercules, who had himself planted the famous cypress grove at Daphne, and typified rebirth".⁷⁶ Hercules is the paradigm of the eternally-imprisoned, dying-and-rising god, and "the common rout", are destined, like him, to be trapped forever in the wheel. Only those blessed with the elite consciousness of the adept or the poet realise the necessity of affirming unflinchingly the record of their own suffering:

To the right hand there lies a secret pool
 Alive with speckled trout and fish of gold;
 A hazel overshadows it. Ophion,
 Primaeval serpent straggling in the branches,
 Darts out his mouth. This holy pool is fed
 By dripping water; guardians stand before it.
 Run to this pool, the pool of Memory,
 Run to this pool!

The pool of memory is surrounded by an array of motifs which effectively integrates the Orphic mysteries into the form of the single poetic theme. The "speckled trout" symbolize the ecstasy which accompanies the poet's affirmation of his own remembered past. Trout were said to sing at several of the springs dedicated to the White Goddess.⁷⁷ "Alive" in the pool of memory, they help the poet-adept recall his moments of joy with the Muse, just as the presence of the "Primaeval serpent", Ophion, reminds him of his ordeal at the hands of Muse and tanist, and menaces him with the prospect of an endless series of further encounters. Similarly, the overhanging hazel holds forth to the adept the promise of poetic wisdom, but he cannot approach it without first confronting the "guardians" who "stand before it." In the cosmology of the single poetic theme,

Ophion "is the serpent demiurge of Hebrew and Egyptian myth",⁷⁸ the rebellious consort of the Goddess from whom the created universe issued. He is also representative of the chaos serpent, "Into whose chops with naked sword"⁷⁹ the hero-victim springs in order to undergo his symbolic death and rebirth. However, at this stage of the mythology the adept does not seek rebirth, and we shall see later that the success of the adept results in the theme throwing up a revised account of the serpent forms variously associated with the Goddess.

The guardians of the pool of Memory test the endurance of the adept against his capacity to remember and his fear of "Ophion's flickering tongue". In response to their question "What have you to remember?" he is instructed to recite the Orphic litany which proclaims him "...a child of Earth/But of Sky also", asserting not only his humanity, but also his affinity with the divine soul-substance from which the fragments of the sparagmos were lost. The ritual formula acknowledges the full cost of a lifetime devoted to the Muse, including "full quittance for my deeds of blood", and investiture in the "sea purple" of her royal victims. Pride and shame are each purged away by the adept having partaken, whilst living, of the omophagia, the eucharistical rite of Dionysus which unites victim, celebrant and participant, and which is summed up in the "Orphic formula" with which the adept concludes his discourse: "And like a kid have fallen into milk",

which was a password for initiates when they reached Hades and were challenged by the guardians of the dead. They had become one with The Kid, that is to say the immortal Dionysus, originally Cretan Zagreus, by partaking of his flesh, and with the Goat-goddess, his mother, in whose cauldron and milk he had been seethed.⁸⁰

It is important that, in Graves' interpretation, the omophagia includes identification with the mother of the eaten god, Semele

or Althea, because the final question posed by the guardians, "What of your feet?" leads the adept to the central point where Orphism and the single poetic theme converge:

You shall reply: 'My feet have borne me here
Out of the weary wheel, the circling years,
To that still, spokeless wheel:- Persephone.

The goal of the adept's initiation is to escape the Wheel. In Graves' view, at the heart of the Orphic mysteries, as of all authentic religions, is a revelation of the Great Goddess. Deliverance from the wheel takes the adept to "her benign keeping", "excused further Tearings-to-pieces, Destructions, Resurrections and Rebirths." This manumission also reveals the memory myth in a much purer light, as yet another means, in Graves' aesthetic, of overcoming the predatory claims of the ego, which imprison the psyche within a debilitating notion of time-as-decay: "'all things flow'".⁸¹ The memory myth seeks to counteract this crippling sense of loss by restoring to the meaning of 'remembering' its full archaic sense of anamnesis:

It (anamnesis) is not quite easy to represent accurately in English, words like "remembrance" or "memorial" having for us a connotation of something absent which is only mentally re-collected. But in the scriptures...anamnesis and the cognate verb have a sense of "recalling" or "representing"...an event in the past so that it becomes here and now operative by its effects.⁸²

In the Perennialist conception of myth, the eucharistic sacrifice of the dying-and-rising god in the shape of the sacred beast reiterates the Orphic doctrine that "creation is always through a sacrifice...":

the multiplicity of things is the One dis-membered and divided. By yet another sacrifice the One is re-membered - "Do this in re-membrance (anamnesis) of Me" - for the original unity is restored when the sacrifice is repeated, because the repetition is a recollection of what was done "in the beginning".⁸³

The adept who reaches the pool of Memory armed with the full remembrance of his past has achieved the level of mythical perception which frees him from bondage to time and releases him from the trials of the Great Wheel. He has carried the record of his past sufferings into the present so that it has become here and now operative by its effect. In so doing, the adept breaks through into a mode of being where the divisions between subject and object no longer exist, the forms of past and present collapse in on themselves and are abolished, and mythical time is regained: "...that still, spokeless wheel". According to Eliade, this is the ultimate goal of all magical quests over which the shaman presides:

As a summary formula we might say that by "living" the myths one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a "sacred" Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable.⁸⁴

Memory, then, is the secret key to answering the questions which vexed paganism, 'Must all things swing round again for ever? Or how can one escape from the Wheel?' It confirms the possibility of escape, and by that action extends the imaginative range of the single poetic theme. The Goddess who presides over the still, spokeless wheel is Persephone, identical to that same "Lady Proserpine" who turned the dead soldier-poet Graves back from Hades to be reborn to a transfigured life.⁸⁵ "Proserpina, or Persephone ('Voice of Destruction')", Graves writes, "is the Muse in her most implacable aspect".⁸⁶ But she is not to be understood within the existing categories of the Theme, precisely because she represents an aspect of the Muse hitherto hidden from the poet labouring within "the weary wheel, the circling years". The poet-adept who remains faithful to his vision of the White Goddess learns that,

At Hierapolis, Jerusalem and Rome she acknowledged a mysterious sister, the Goddess of Wisdom, whose temple was small and unthronged. Call her the Black Goddess: Provençal and Sicilian 'Black Virgins' are so named because they derive from an ancient tradition of Wisdom as Blackness. This Black Goddess, who represents a miraculous certitude in love, ordained that the poet who seeks her must pass uncomplaining through all the passionate ordeals to which the White Goddess may subject him.⁸⁷

The Black Goddess is the sovereign deity of a state of consciousness which renews the Theme for one final creative outburst, in the language of the aged poet-adept who has passed undeterred through the shaping experiences of violence and love. She governs a state of perfect rest, beyond the need to endure, and her wisdom consists of that "miraculous certitude in love", beyond suffering and tragic submission, which affirms the values of poetic love and invites the poet to exalt in the consummation of his life's work. She is the fulfilment of the one story, the point to which the spiral moves, and, in the words of the late G.S. Fraser (still the most perceptive of Graves' critics), the principle which secures in Graves' work "the transformation of pain into the excellence of art".⁸⁸

The Orphic adept completes his pilgrimage to the Goddess of Wisdom when he finally drinks "of that refreshing draught" from the pool of Memory, and is raised to the oracular status promised the poet in "Darren" but not celebrated until now:

To become lords of the uninitiated
Twittering ghosts, Hell's countless populace -
To become heroes, knights upon swift horses,
Pronouncing oracles from tall white tombs
By the nymphs tended.

This is the highest goal to which the poet can aspire, and it represents the final metamorphosis of the beloved victim in Graves' writings. To achieve the status of an oracle is to have at last found contentment

and self-acceptance beyond the passionate extremes of the Theme. Surrounded by the Goddess' nymphs, the oracular poet divests Ophion of his terror by appropriating the "serpent shapes" as symbols of his newly-won oracular powers, to which "libations" are poured. The Orphic soul has been conducted back to its point of origin, and the Muse-poet has found his longed-for rest.

The extent to which Graves identifies with the fate of Orpheus, as well as with the major doctrines of the Orphic thinkers, is fully revealed in a sequence of poems which runs through the Man Does, Woman Is trilogy. These poems form dramatic highlights from Graves' iconotropic re-reading of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which he conflates with the myth of Hades and Persephone. They also appear as illustrations, with commentary, of Graves' insights into the progress of the poetic career documented in the lecture "Intimations of the Black Goddess".⁸⁹

According to Graves' account of the traditional story of Orpheus and Eurydice, "Eurydice ('Wide Rule') was, in fact, not Orpheus's wife, but the Triple Muse herself",⁹⁰ identical to the Goddess Persephone, who, like Eurydice, was compelled to remain in hell against her will. Telescoping the two myths, Graves arrives at what he believes to be a proto-myth which reconciles the disparate elements of the symbolism and restores the Goddess to her central role in the drama:

Orpheus recognized and glorified the Muse; in gratitude, she lent him her own magical powers, so that he made trees dance - 'trees', in ancient Europe, being a widely-used metaphor of the poetic craft.⁹¹

The love between Orpheus and Eurydice is described in the sequence as "...that royal certitude,/That simultaneous recognition", which springs primarily from the woman's "heart sown with headlong wisdom". This is the same 'wisdom' which the Black Goddess dispenses to her

devotees, characteristic of the female intuition which sublimates the aspirations of the male will and the predatory claims of reason. Elsewhere, Graves feels confident enough to claim that

The subject of poetry is the certitude that,
despite all possible doubts and difficulties,
true lovers will one day reconcile...imagination
with reason...the male with the female mind. This
happens only in a timeless now which must not,
however, be dismissed as a fanciful then by its
participants: it is the now of wisdom, the poetic
now, the now of the Black Goddess - of Wisdom as
Night.⁹²

The Orphic "royal certitude" which the lovers in "The Unnamed Spell"⁹³ experience enables them to descend with "A branch Hell-harrowing", in a triumphant inversion of the death-descent of the mortal soul. Hades holds no terrors for those who surround themselves with the certitude of erotic love,

Who themselves sometimes raised an arch -
Pillared with honour; its lintel, love -
And passed silently through.

The journey into hell is not a movement towards death, but rather an approach to the Night-wisdom of the Black Goddess.

Adopting the persona of Orpheus, and acting out his role, confers upon the poet the type of enlightenment accorded the adept who succeeds in reaching the pool of Memory. The poet, however, must first confront and affirm the complete, totalizing reality of the Great Goddess, including the pattern of cruelty, violence and betrayal which lurks behind the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and which emerges in the sequence of poems Graves has drawn from their story. The myth of Orpheus, according to Graves, dramatises the transition of the poet from suffering to wisdom. Orpheus will achieve the state of oracular wisdom at the still centre of the spokeless wheel only when he has been reminded of the Muse's caprice. Continuing his iconotropic

redaction Graves moves from the joy celebrated in a poem like "The Unnamed Spell" to ask:

How could Orpheus hope to keep her always beside
him in the bright upper air of love and truth?
Had she not a secret passion for serpents, a
delight in murder, a secret craving for corpse
flesh, a need to spend seven months of the year
consorting with the sly, the barren, the damned?
She might cherish Orpheus while still on earth,
even calling him beautiful - since his beauty
reflected her own - and mourn him when he was
murdered....Yet she could not be bound by his
hopes for her perfectibility.⁹⁴

Addressed as "Prince Orpheus" in the poem "Food of the Dead",⁹⁵
the poet is reminded by his "scarred face" of pain through which
his love of woman has put him. Reflecting upon a lifetime's
injuries, Graves fatalistically observes of the Orpheus-mask, "Yet
are you patient still, when she has eaten/Food of the dead". In
his Orpheus persona, symbolically re-enacting the ancient legend,
the poet knows that he is destined to be betrayed by Eurydice's compact
with his tanist, "the serpent at her thighs", and accepts that each
time he is betrayed he must prepare "For a new progress through new
wards of hell".

Eurydice never trod accidentally on a serpent
while avoiding Aristaeus's lustful embraces: she
surely chose to couple with a serpent - as Mother
Eurynome ('Wide Order'), her ancestress, herself
had coupled with the world-snake Ophion. Simple-
minded Orpheus flattered her pride by challenging
death in his descent to Hell, and she pretended
to follow him up into the sunlight....But
soon retired.⁹⁶

The moment when Eurydice is poised upon the threshold of the
Taenaran Cave is the point at which the poet-as-Orpheus feels the
love and cruelty of the Triple Muse most keenly. She stands between
hell and earth, between the rival claims of her twin lovers, but
rejects the embrace of her noble-hearted poet-lover in favour of

the allure of his chthonic serpent-tanist who draws her back towards her true home: the Hades that is, paradoxically, the paradise of her wisdom. This instant of decision is captured in "An East Wind":

'Poised in air between earth and paradise,
Paradise and earth, confess which pull
Do you find the stronger? Is it of homesickness
Or of passion? Would you be rather loyal or wise?
How are these choices reconcilable?97

The choices can only be reconciled, in fact, within the terms of the single poetic theme. It is the function of the Orpheus figure to reveal the goal to which the Theme is moving; the trajectory which takes the poet through suffering and loss towards a final point of atonement and rest. As the most significant poem in the sequence confirms, the Orphic wisdom does not save the bereft poet from the full anguish of his abandonment. When the poet-as-Orpheus sees his beloved turn away from him, he is overcome by the grief and anger which spills over into the poem "Eurydice":

'I am oppressed, I am oppressed, I am oppressed' -
Once I utter the curse, how can she rest:
No longer able, weeping, to placate me
With renewed auguries of celestial beauty?98

What, in fact, Orpheus witnesses, as he gazes upon the underworld sequel to his abandonment, is the assimilation of Eurydice to that other underworld divinity, Persephone. Eurydice-as-Persephone transforms the "celestial beauty" cherished by Orpheus into a vision of the Goddess of Death, the fifth station of the sacred year, who "has gnawn at corpse-flesh till her breath stank". The poet cannot tolerate the notion of his own betrayal because it so fatally compromises his vision of the Muse. Yet when we explore the limitations of the poet's own self-understanding we can perhaps grasp the reasons for his failure to comprehend the full implications of the single poetic

theme; in particular, his inability to see what the merging of Eurydice with Persephone implies about the nature of poetic love.

The poet describes himself and his emotional state in a language we have come to associate not with the wisdom of Orpheus, but with the foolhardy defiance of the lion-lover Hercules: "In a mirror I watch blood trickling down the wall-/Is it mine? Yet still I stand here proud and tall." The essence of the Orphic wisdom is self-renunciation, the capacity to set aside pride and the claims of the ego, relying upon the redemptive power of memory to release the self from the torments of love, action and violence. Beneath the surface emotions of pride, anger and jealousy, the Orphic sense of enlightenment begins to shine through, compelling the poet to confront the possibility that it is these very emotions which bind him to his fate:

My own dear heart, dare you so war on me
As to strangle love in a mad perversity?
Is ours a fate that can ever be forsworn
Though my lopped head sing to the yet unborn?

In asking these questions, the poet has begun to grasp the full implications of the Orpheus story. There is a realisation that pride and jealousy "strangle love", and the questing, probing intellect of the poet has begun to look for a means of forswearing such "mad perversity". The questions themselves are forced upon the poet by the events of the closing stages of the drama of Orpheus: the ritual sacrifice of the poet-priest who is, in a sense, identical with the god Dionysus, yet whose elevation to oracular status holds forth the opportunity of transcending the fate of the dying-and-rising god:

Orpheus was torn in pieces: the fate of all Muse-worshipping poets. But his head continued to sing; and even the cynical Serpent (who asks: 'Why deceive yourself? She will always need corpse flesh and the charm of my subtle tongue')

could not silence it. Neither could Apollo, God
of Reason, make Orpheus hold his peace for ever.⁹⁹

The image of the singing head is another image of poetic survival beyond the Great Wheel of incarnations, when the poet has attained a peace and an oracular certitude after pain which frees him from the obligation to go on telling the one story. Instead, he can celebrate from the still centre of the spokeless wheel his rest after labour, and the quiet tranquillity and certitude dreamt of in "A Last Poem",¹⁰⁰ when the Muse reassures him "'But this is truth written by you only,/And for me only; therefore, love, have done'".

The ultimate point of rest and consummation in Graves' later poetry shares some of the ambiguity which surrounded the presence of the White Goddess in the writings she was said to have inspired. Wisdom is certainly an old man's virtue, signifying the aged poet's calculatedly final effort at self-renewal. She is, like her sister, draped in a colour which is no colour, and her influence is associated with night and darkness and an unseen mystical truth. The poem "The Black Goddess" speaks of

Silence, words into foolishness fading,
Silence, prolonged, of thought so secret
We hush the sheep-bells and the loud cicada.¹⁰¹

It seems that, white or black, the Goddess inhabits a realm of awareness uncomfortably proximate to the ineffable, the apophatic. The place where words fade, and thought becomes detached from language may be the adept's paradise, the Orphic's still centre. But it is the death of poetry, and it casts a long, muffling shadow back over the work of a lifetime, reminding us that the Triple Muse possesses that piety of metaphor which, Joel Fineman claims, the Gnostics both feared and adored.¹⁰² Whether as trace in the poet's mind or as fading words on the page, the Goddess presides over a sacred void which is insatiable

for meaning. The single poetic theme and the best of Graves' poetry hover over that void, investing it with meaning. However, the Black Goddess, especially, seems to be a figuration of death rather than life, of absence rather than presence, and it is difficult to see where poetry can go after she has emerged as its goal.

The Fifth Station

It is common for critics and scholars to regard the verse of Graves' final period as signifying a decline in poetic power.¹⁰³ Towards the end of his career, Graves certainly became less ruthlessly selective than he had been with the output from earlier phases of his work. Many poems survive from the volumes of his last years which would have been discarded had he applied the standards of previous periods. It is common among the few critics who have examined this phase of Graves' writing to attribute the relaxation of critical vigilance to the decline in importance of the single poetic theme.¹⁰⁴ Overworked and, after the arrival of the Black Goddess, incapable of further development, the myth ceased to be the informing force of Graves' poetry, which lapsed into a tedious lyric form reworking old preoccupations and lacking any real vitality. Anthony Parise, one of the many readers to find in the Theme nothing more than a "field theory" which supplies the poetry with interesting motifs, arrives at this same conclusion, dismissing the later poetry as hackneyed and stereotyped.¹⁰⁵ Even the path-breaking Daniel Hoffmann feels that, after the high point of his prose speculations, Graves proved incapable of producing a body of poetry worthy of the Theme he had uncovered.¹⁰⁶

The problem with these arguments is that they fail to address one of the central features of Graves' work that I have sought to emphasize throughout this study; that the single poetic theme is part of the form of Graves' most interesting verse - not simply as

a repository of valuable metaphors, but as the great code, the "historical grammar", through which an understanding of the world is formed, and without which the poetry cannot be properly comprehended. Rather than attempt to approach Graves' work from the perspective of Jung¹⁰⁷ or Freud or Frazer,¹⁰⁸ the reader is challenged to interpret it in its own terms; that is, in terms of the mythical infrastructure Graves has himself created, the epic bricolage of texts, subtexts, alphabets, literary fragments, icons, palimpsests, stories and autobiography, which the poetry momentarily resolves into a great, if imperfect, vision of the Triple Muse. Our use of parallel or alternative anthropological models should serve only to assist us in grasping the purposes of Graves' own model, by increasing our understanding of the relationship between mythology and culture.

It is true that, after the publication of "Intimations of the Black Goddess", Graves wrote nothing of scholarly interest upon the single poetic theme, despite the fact that it was at this time that his literary reputation was at its height. However, as we have seen, the Black Goddess implies the silence of night and death, the wisdom which transports the poet-victim from the torments and ecstasies of love to the peace that surpasses understanding. The evolution of the Theme, which saw the Hercules persona yield to the figure of Orpheus, removed Graves from the direct confrontation with experience to a more philosophical and reflective plane, and this shift is echoed in the altered register of the poetry, which becomes more meditative and sequestered.

To see in this shift, however, as several critics have done, a diminution in the power of the monomyth is to ignore the extent to which the state of being figured in the character of Orpheus and vouchsafed by the Black Goddess, the state of oracular wisdom, is itself predicated upon the myth. Oracular wisdom represents, in.

many senses, the goal of the single poetic theme, the point to which it is moving from its earliest germination in Graves' life and thought. Wisdom is, as I have suggested, a species of self-renewal which entails a coming to terms with death, but this is achieved by utilizing the full vocabulary of the single poetic theme, not by abandoning it. From his hard-won point of rest, the poet can scan the motifs of the Theme with a detached eye, but there is no question of devaluing them:

Historians may scorn the close engagement
Of Moon with Lion that we have witnessed
Here in this lair, here in this numinous grove,
May write me down as imbecile, or presume
A clot of madness festering in your heart -
Such is tomorrow's envy of today.¹⁰⁹

The Orphic vantage-point does not imply a repudiation of the Theme, but rather its fulfilment. Poet and Muse can accept the joys and disappointments of love armed with the oracular certitude which divests both love and time of the fear they once exercised over the beloved victim:

Moon and Sun are one. Granted, they ride
Paths unconformable to the calendar,
And seldom does a New Moon coincide
With a New Year; yet we agree:
'What will be, is' - rejoicing at a day
Of dolphins jostling in the blue bay,
Eagles in air, and flame on every tree.¹¹⁰

The subdued tone of such verse should not mislead us into believing that the myth has faded from view. The celestial symbolism, and the calendrical image of eternal recurrence derive from the deepest-laid motherlode of the single poetic theme. From the equanimity of the still centre, the poet continues to affirm the fundamental insight of the Theme, "That timeless magic first began/When woman bared her soul to man."¹¹¹ His removal from the Great Wheel of suffering

is not a removal from the discourse of the myth. Although there is now no need for doctrinal poetry, or for the expository prose which accompanied it, the emotional life of poet and Muse is still to be understood in terms of the radiant motifs supplied by the drama of the Goddess' dealings with her lovers. Nor does oracular certitude obscure the tribulations of a long and eventful life. The poet continues to recognize that between himself and his lover there lies "an age of violence" which requires to be assimilated by any romantic mythology of love. Hence poet and Muse enter the domain of the Goddess acknowledging that

Here brooded power beyond comparison,
Tremendous as a thousand bee-stings
Or a great volley of steel-tipped arrows...112

It is only by affirming the reality of the violence which lies at the heart of the experience of love that the poet earns the right to enter into the state of wisdom.

The background against which the drama of love unfolds continues to be, in this phase of Graves' writing, the pastoral paradise, though now stripped down to its essential elements. The sense of disturbance and anguish has been replaced by a quieter, more positive understanding of the pastoral, where the oracular poet has subdued the symbolism of the terrain to the limits of his own awareness, an awareness shaped by a lifetime's direct engagement with the paradox of the self's reflection in nature. Each element in the landscape is named and understood, the poet more solemnly detached from the scene than before, but nevertheless self-assured in his grasp of the timeless principalities:

Absence reintegrates our pact of pacts -
The hoopoe tells us how:
With bold love-magic, Moon in Leo,
Sun in Pisces, blossom upon bough.113

The shadow of the lion lover, the midsummer sacrifice, continues to haunt this landscape, though poet and hoopoe rest in a calm assurance which simply lists the symbolic elements of the vista with a cool, confident precision.

The lovers who inhabit the symbolic landscapes of Graves' later poetry continue to participate in the ceremony of love celebrated in his verse as the "one story". However, there appears to be no sense in which the recurrence of the Theme, or the repeated rearrangement of the same basic elements, diminishes the capacity of the monomyth to awaken the lovers to a renewed appreciation of the emotions which possess them. The primordial power of love, which strikes "Swifter than reason, and despite reason",¹¹⁴ refuses to be blunted by iteration, and, in the later poetry, renews its capacity to 'astonish' in a diversity of moments and situations.

The lovers who wander through the pastoral oasis described in "Ambience",¹¹⁵ under the tutelage of "The nymph of the forest", gasp at the harmony of mind, love and nature there offered them, and are "Astonished" that the various elements of the pastoral landscape "can so extemporize/Their own parts...yet avoid discordance." In "This Holy Month",¹¹⁶ there is a renewal of the recognition that it is the same intractable force of love, "The demon who throughout our late estrangement/Followed with malice in my footsteps", who, at the instant of reunion,

Astonishes us with blossom, silvers the hills
With more than moonlight, summons bees in swarms
From the Lion's mouth to fill our hives with honey,
Turns flesh into fire, and eyes into deep lakes...

Even the woman in "Her Brief Withdrawal",¹¹⁷ momentarily terrified by the role into which her poet-lover has cast her, recognizes, when she interrogates him, that "the answers astound". She is brought

to a point of illumination similar to that hailed in "The Theme of Death",¹¹⁸ where the patient lovers are assured that "love is an astonished always/Challenging the long lies of history." It is a sign of the wisdom-poet's sense of submission to the drama from which he has been released that he can ask and then answer his own question:

Can I be astonished at male trembling
Of sea-horizons as you lean towards them?
Nothing now astonishes.¹¹⁹

The emphasis upon 'astonishment', carries us back through 'astoner', to the Latin 'tonare', meaning 'thunder', and back still further to the Indo-European root for storm, TUN, imitating the sound of the storms which sweep across Graves' primitive pastoral, sudden revelations of the destructive power of the Great Goddess.¹²⁰

The wisdom poet overcomes the capacity of the Theme to astonish because he has transcended the wheel where love and violence, dedication and betrayal, collide and become forms of one another. But the state of being at which he has arrived can be properly understood only in terms of the myth, and the symbolism with which it supplies the poetry. It is the place that The White Goddess calls "the Fifth Station", governed by the last vowel of the sacred alphabet, presided over by the Goddess-as-Crone: the station of Death.¹²¹ The mythological form of the station is the sepulchral isle to which the singing head of the sacred king Orpheus is translated after death. This island is the topographical representation of the spiral castle, or the Orphic spokeless wheel: the still centre around which revolves the one story, the passage of the king through his annual cycle.

Graves describes his own approach to the Fifth Station in the poem "Apple Island",¹²² which begins with a cluster of images associated with the destructive presence of the Goddess in nature. She is represented by the "cruel seas" which "like mountains fill the bay",

battering "quayside huts" and "vineyards", fragile monuments to the presence of human life along the coastline. Her emblems assemble out of the stormy disarray of nature, clearly-defined characters spelling out the narrative of the one story:

...the moon shines dangerously clear,
Fixed in another cycle
Than the sun's progress round the fellow'd year;

The juxtaposition of moon and sun, of lunar time and solar time, compares the changes which take the Muse from Nymph to Crone, mistress to murderess, with the long labour of the poet-victim through the ever-repeated cycle of death and rebirth as he struggles to prove his worthiness to the Goddess.

Throughout the poem, it is the hostile, malevolent aspect of the Goddess that is emphasized, in order to highlight the difficulty of loving her successfully. In the face of such cruelty, it is the poet's capacity for endurance which emerges as the main concern of the poem, the kind of fortitude which sustains the Hercules-lover through his many trials, tempering his pride with the awareness that he must submit completely to the will of the female if he is to escape the hardships of the wheel:

And though I may not hope to dwell apart
With you on Apple Island
Unless my breast be docile to the dart -

The introduction of the magical island into the symbolism of the poem offers the "hope", however remote, of 'repose' beyond the "cycle" of "the fellow'd year". It is the point of rest that comes after the storms of the Goddess' caprice have been weathered by the poet prepared to "be docile to the dart" which will take his life and mark his final sacrifice. It is the oracular centre around which turns the life-cycle of the sacred king.

The questions which end the poem hover between the rhetorical and the interrogative:

Why should I fear your element, the sea
Or the full moon, your mirror,
Or the halved apple from your holy tree?

We know that, in one sense, the answers to these questions are simple enough: because the season of tempests marks the final demise of the beloved victim, who is ritually despatched under the sign of the full moon. The answer to the last part of the riddle is supplied by The White Goddess:

For if an apple is halved cross-wise each half shows a five-pointed star in the centre, emblem of immortality, which represents the Goddess in her five stations from birth to death and back to birth again. It also represents the planet Venus - Venus to whom the apple was sacred - adored as Hesper the evening star on one half of the apple, and as Lucifer Son of the Morning on the other.¹²³

The apple of the title satisfies the sacrificial symbolism of the poem, but it also directs attention towards the notion of the five stations which, in turn, holds forth the prospect of release from the sacrificial cycle. Therefore an alternative reading of the final stanza, particularly one taken from the perspective of the Orphic figure who has himself escaped the wheel, would see the questions as rhetorically dismissive. The true poet need fear nothing emblematic of the Muse because he is assured of eventual transport to her sacred Apple Island where he will become an oracular hero excused further torments at her hands.

The poetry of the Fifth Station, self-consciously the poetry of the final phase of a long and incredibly eventful career, certainly does not require the same resources of the mythopoeic mode evident in Graves' earlier Muse poetry. However, this is a fact itself comprehen-

sible within the terms of the single poetic theme. The advent of the Black Goddess marks a deliberate effacement of the high mythopoeic style by a form of consciousness which specifically defines itself in terms which eschew many of the outward trappings of myth. It does so by, among other things, calling into question the primary symbols of the earlier mythology:

Black drinks the sun and draws all colours to it.
I am bleached white, my truant love. Come back,
And stain me with intensity of black.¹²⁴

We saw before that the colour white was a deeply ambivalent feature of the Goddess in Graves' poetry. It is in this brief lyric that Graves comes closest to equating whiteness with the absence, rather than the presence, of the Goddess. Conversely, it is blackness which is identified with "intensity", with a full presence which 'stains' the poet. Yet we also know that the state of wisdom commanded by the Black Goddess is cognate with silence and night, and spells release from the obligation to write poetry and generate fresh arrangements of the monomyth. She is, therefore, in one sense, the end of myth, and, in the poem cited above, Graves seems to be seeking to immerse himself wholly in this realm of pure wisdom, which is pure silence. The explanation of this paradox is a straightforward, if bleak, one. We must remember that the Fifth Station is death. The yearning for the Black Goddess can, indeed, be seen to be central to the single poetic theme, because it provides the poet with a means of rejoicing in his own mortality, a means of affirming death, even as her equally evasive sister may be perceived as a means of affirming life, regardless of her precise ontological status.

When this cluster of ideas is imported into the writing of poetry, its effect is to complicate still further the relationship between myth, biography and reality. I have resisted the view implied by

several critics that the later poetry represents a demythologizing of the Theme, and, instead, have tried to demonstrate that it shows the poetry evolving towards a natural conclusion, with all of its central motifs intact. But the progression towards silence and death allows challenges to emerge in the verse which the myth had hitherto succeeded in repressing. The most achieved of these statements is the hauntingly beautiful lyric "Her Brief Withdrawal",¹²⁵ which, in its anxious, probing reflections, advances the speculation that the myth has, perhaps, burdened erotic love with a significance that no relation can hope to sustain:

'Forgive me, love, if I withdraw awhile:
It is only that you ask such bitter questions,
Always another beyond the extreme last.
And the answers astound: you have entangled me
In my own mystery. Grant me a respite:

The speaker in this poetic monologue is, unusually for Graves, a woman: the real flesh and blood woman in whom the Muse is temporarily resident. Her short, clipped statements and entreaties reveal an intelligence troubled by the role into which it has been pressed; exploring and uncovering the detailed psychological pattern of the drama unfolding all around her. She balks at the difficult part she has been asked to play, and begs time to "withdraw" from the sheer emotional intensity disclosed by the situation. Yet it is clear from the outset of the poem that, despite her misgivings, it is her partner who is prompted to ask, and keep asking, the "bitter questions" in response to which her role in the single poetic theme is more and more clearly expressed. This ritual of question and response may remind us of the ceremonial dialogues in which Graves sought, during an earlier phase of the myth, to enlarge upon the relationship of poet and Muse. In this later setting, though, the woman appears less ready to submit herself to the inchoate force

seeking expression through her life and her utterances. She acknowledges that "the answers astound", and it is clear that these are answers which she herself has supplied. But nowhere else has Graves sincerely engaged with the awful internal division to which the monomyth gives rise: the tension between individuality and a rigid, inexorable process insensible to personal intention or design, which ventriloquizes answers from the woman of whom it has taken possession. The conversational register of the poem, the careful insinuation of affection and exasperation between the parentheses, and the carefully-measured colons which seem to map out the speaker's search for explanations, confirm this as the utterance of a fully human voice. "You have entangled me/In my own mystery" shows the woman demurring at the scheme in which she is confined, yet admitting that its source is to be found in her own paradoxical nature.

The lost freedom of which the woman goes on to speak continues the paradox, because it immediately suggests the precise characteristics that elevate a woman to the station of the Muse: "Choosing by appetite only: self-deposed/Self-reinstated, no one observing." The qualities she feels she has left behind are exactly those which assured her the role of Muse in the poet's life and in his verse. She laments also the loss of an un-self-conscious spontaneity, prior to the role of Muse, unaffected by the inflexions of the single poetic theme, a freedom from the onerous responsibilities of her mythological functions, when

No one could certify my powers for me
Or my saining virtue, or know that I compressed
Knots of destiny in a careless fist...

Her elevation to the quasi-divine status of the Muse appears to be resisted in a protest which regards myth as a circumscribing influence, limiting and confining her individual nature within a barbarous symbolic

order, where every gesture is possessed of "this vibrancy of touch", and even "folded arms" are taken to signify an "active vengeance".

Yet, as her nostalgic description of these lost liberties proceeds, it becomes clear that the woman has become trapped by her own discourse. Her words are gradually recuperated by the vast synthesizing powers of the myth against which they were raised in protest in the first place. Such is the boundless capacity of myth for drawing every response into the hermeneutics of its charmed circle. The speaker makes a gradual transition from remembering her pre-mythological self to describing herself in conventionally mythological terms which, quite inevitably, tail off into an exponentially-fading elision:

I who had passed for a foundling from the hills
Of innocent and flower-like phantasies,
Though minting silver by my mere tread...

Accurately-recollected memories of an individual person resisting absorption into the monomyth give way to familiar folklore motifs, distant echoes of "The Song of Blodeuwedd",¹²⁶ and a final allusion to the Goddess herself, in whose "footprints asphodels were said to spring up"¹²⁷ as she passed. By the end of the poem, the woman's protest has collapsed into a futile might-have-been which underlines her submission to the Theme: "Did I not dote on you, I might well strike you/For implicating me in your true dream.'" The disturbing recognition that it is her male partner who has generated the myth persists to the end, but it is a recognition which simultaneously acknowledges a degree of complicity, and which cannot break free of the near oxymoron "true dream". The woman boldly identifies the myth as a "dream", a product of the male's imagination; but, at the same time, she assents to its 'truth', and, by implication, to her place within it.

The state of wisdom, which is the point of rest in the long evolution of the myth of the White Goddess in Robert Graves' writings, does not, then, release either the poet or the subject of his verse from the language and symbolism of myth. The presence of the Triple Muse, and the narrative of the single poetic theme, continue to exercise a regular pressure in Graves' poetry to the very end of his writing career, shaping his response to the ominous shadow of approaching death, and determining the part to be played by the experience of love as that shadow lengthens.

The final confrontation with death is anticipated for the aged poet in the increasingly frequent lapses of poetic inspiration, lapses which are themselves interpreted as breaks in the bond uniting the poet to the reviving power of love:

Where are the poems? Why do I write none?
This can mean no lack of pens, nor lack of love,
But need perhaps of an increased magic -
Where have my ancient powers suddenly gone?128

The answers to these questions are contained in a momentary vision granted the poet, which shows his beloved struggling with a presence hitherto unknown to him:

Tonight I caught a glimpse of her at the gate
Grappling a monster never found before,
And jerking back its head. Had I come too late?
Her eyes blazed fire and I could look no more.

This is, of course, a vision of love confronting, and for a time overcoming, the monster of impending death. But the beast is "at the gate", and the poet fears he has "come too late", suggesting that the encounter is, at best, a doubtful, inconclusive one. Love prevails over death, and succeeds in driving it back - but only for a time.

The appearance of the beloved adds further credence to the impression

that the poet is moving towards some final denouement. "Her eyes blazed fire", provoked by the combat with the monster, but also, perhaps, with that sanguine displeasure of the Muse who repudiates all lovers in whom inspiration has diminished. The poet can "look no more" because in her gaze he sees his own destiny, and realises that the unfamiliar monster is, in many senses, simply another version of his ancient rival, his second self, his tanist or weird, whose arrival signals the poet's demise. This recognition leads the poet to respond to the approach of death in terms which recall the single poetic theme's lament for the inevitable yet tragic death of desire: "What could she hold against me? Never yet/Had I lied to her or thwarted her desire..." In spite of the obvious pain entailed by the loss of love, death itself is stripped of its terror by being located within the age-old pattern of the myth, where it becomes simply another episode in the great cycle of the Muse's dealings with her lovers.

Graves' final published poem, "Twin to Twin",¹²⁹ is another poem very definitely of the Fifth Station, particularly in the language of its opening stanza. The poet invites his tanist to desist from their endless struggle, and to join him in mourning:

Come, ancient rival, royal weird,
Who each new May must grip my beard
Till circling time shall cease to be:
Ground your red lance and mourn with me,
Though it were briefly.

At first sight, the request is a fitting utterance from the Orphic viewpoint of Repose or Death, embracing the end of the struggle between the rival twins for the love of the Goddess. Each is asked to acknowledge that the "pact of hate" which bound them together can now be set aside, as they perceive that, from time immemorial, they have been cuckolded by a harsh and indifferent mistress who now, since they have grown old, "with unmagic mars the strand/Of her own island".

It is the state of wisdom which fosters the desire to leave behind the trappings of the bitter struggles of the sacred king, shifting away from the confrontational language of the White Goddess to the silence and rest of the Black Goddess. However, wisdom, it seems, could not fully account for the unknown monster of death glimpsed by the poet "At the Gate", and we saw the encounter with death comprehended very much in terms of the shifting allegiance of the Muse to the two rivals for her affection. A similar resurgence of the rhetoric of the White Goddess occurs in "Twin to Twin" where, instead of Orphic serenity, Graves reasserts the defiance of the lion lover:

Yet, once again, your heart being true,
Our interrupted strife renew:
Reach for my beard with heaving breast
To roar: "You lie! She loved me best",
And fight your fiercest.

It appears, then, that the existential encounter with death calls forth several different responses from Graves, utilizing several voices from the polyphony of the single poetic theme. Chief among these is the voice of Orpheus, speaking from the still centre where death is perceived as the final form of release from the demands of the Great Wheel. But lurking within some of these late poems is the irrepressible presence of Hercules, for whom death is not release, but another challenge in the eternally-recurring rivalry of the twin gods for the love of the inscrutable three-fold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poetry remains more ambiguous than the prose, which is confident in asserting the eventual sovereignty of the Black Goddess of Wisdom and her blissfully content Orphic adept. But perhaps the threat of the Black Goddess to the radiant vitality of the myth, its splendid array of numinous motifs, its violence and passion, its moments of pain and benediction, its

commanding artifice of suffering, endurance and triumph - the threat to the pattern of the one story, provoked a reaction in Graves' poetry which demanded the restatement of its central insights. To neither Hercules nor Orpheus, in the last analysis, is death a threat. The poetry of the Fifth Station, in whichever voice it is spoken, affirms the convictions of a lifetime, and persists to the end in offering them as a valid and, more importantly, a complete account of what it is to be human, regardless of the lies of history and reason - "Till circling time shall cease to be..."

Notes to Chapter 6

1. This is a point emphasised throughout Turner's work. See, especially, Victor Turner, Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual (Washington, 1982); The Ritual Process: structure and anti-structure (London, 1979).
2. See above, pp. 101ff.
3. See above, pp. 139ff.
4. See above, pp. 79ff.
5. See above, pp. 82ff
6. Robert Graves, "The Poet's Paradise", Oxford Addresses on Poetry, pp. 109-29. The Wasson's mycological studies are available in a series of monumental volumes: See R.G. Wasson, Soma: divine mushroom of Immortality (Harcourt, 1971); Maria Sabina and her Mazatec Mushroom Velada: Ethno-mycological studies Vol 3 (Harcourt, 1974): this book includes a set of audio tapes in which the Mazatec ritual in which Graves himself once took part is recorded. Wasson's most ambitious book on the ritual uses of mushrooms is contained in: R.G. Wasson, Albert Hofmann and Carl A.P. Ruck, The Road to Eleusis: unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries (London, 1978). The authors conclude that the Eleusinian Mysteries involved the ritual consumption of psylocibe and its equivalents. That it took Wasson ten years to marshal ethnographic support for ideas Graves had felt no qualms about championing, may be taken as a tribute to the poet's foresight.
7. See Roger Heim, Le genre Inocybe precede d'une introduction generale a l'etude des Agarics Ochrospores, (Vol 1 of Encyclopedie Mycologique (Paris, 1931); (with R.G. Wasson) Les Champignons hallucinogens du Mexique (Paris, 1958).
8. John Allegro, The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross: a study of the nature and origins of Christianity within the fertility cults of the ancient Near East (London, 1970). Allegro submits that Christianity was originally a Judaeo-Hellenic mystery cult with a secret sacramental meal involving the consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms - a Great Sacrament held in reserve for 'higher' initiates, of which the traditional Eucharist was only an imitation.
9. Taylor's is really work-in-progress, and may be taken as an index of the seriousness with which ethno-mycological studies are now regarded twenty-five years after Graves espoused theories many then looked upon as cranky. See Rogan Taylor, "Who is Santa Claus?", in The Sunday Times Magazine, December 21 1980, pp. 8-17. Taylor here emphasizes the connection between hallucinogenic mushrooms and shamanism. He suggests that the Santa Claus figure has elements clinging to him of an archaic shamanism, and adduces parallels to the figure among the shaman traditions of ancient peoples such as the Lapps and the Siberian Koryak, whose customs stretch back unbroken to the last Ice Age, out of which the Indo-European races emerged. Central to these traditions is the use of the fly agaric mushroom to induce the shaman's ecstatic trance, a notion preserved in the colours of Santa Claus' costume, his association with reindeer, and his descent down through the chimney - probably the smoke-hole entrance to the Siberian yurt. Taylor developed some of these ideas in Dreamflower

and Toadskin Spell, BBC Radio 4, 29 September 1986.

10. See Graves, "The Poet's Paradise", op. cit.

11. Oxford Addresses on Poetry, p. 128.

12. Ibid p. 118.

13. The Greek Myths Vol 1, Foreword.

14. Oxford Addresses on Poetry, p. 121.

15. Ibid p. 118.

16. See The Greek Myths Vol 1, pp. 107-11. This view finds support in at least one of the major studies of the god: Marcel Detienne, Dionysus Slain (Baltimore, 1979).

17. The White Goddess, p. 212.

18. Ibid p. 134. The latest study of the cult of Dionysos stresses the element of metamorphosis in the mythology, equating it with the efforts of civilized Greeks to come to terms with the religious practices of the neighbours against whom they defined themselves, yet in whose chthonic religions they found sources of feeling which accorded with their own ambivalent response to the menacing powers of nature and animality. See Maria Daraki, Dionysos (Paris, 1985).

19. Collected Poems, p. 249.

20. This is the collective title given by Graves to the three volumes More Poems 1961 (London, 1961); New Poems 1962 (London, 1962); Man Does, Woman Is (London, 1964). The three books appear in Collected Poems. More Poems 1961 is represented by Sections XI and XII, with the omission of "In Single Syllables", "The Intrusion", "To Myrto of Myrtles", "Anchises to Aphrodite", "Two Children" and "Established Lovers" from the original. New Poems 1962 is represented by Sections XIII and XIV. Man Does, Woman Is is represented by Sections XV and XVI, with the omission of "Here Live Your Life Out!", "Burn It!" and "Rain Of Brimstone" from the original. Unless otherwise stated, all references are to the poems as they appear in Collected Poems.

21. The Greek Myths Vol 1, Foreword.

22. Poetic Craft and Principle, p. 171.

23. "The Second-Fated", Collected Poems, p. 196.

24. Oxford Addresses on Poetry, p. 120.

25. The White Goddess, p. 134.

26. Ibid p. 129.

27. The Greek Myths Vol 2, p. 88.

28. Ibid p. 88.

29. The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 103.

30. Evidence of Neolithic measurements of lunar time may be found in Richard Leakey, The Making of Mankind (London, 1980), pp. 176-80. Leakey describes a bone dagger which has scratched upon it a rudimentary 28-day cycle, dating from c. 40,000 BC. G.S. Kirk sees in this version of Hercules the conflict structuralists identify in myth between Nature and Culture: "The hero's civilized actions...include the founding of the Olympic games and presiding over initiation-rituals. His bestial or barbaric actions will be considered under the heading 'Nature', implying the untrammelled working of 'the world of nature' as opposed to human law and convention...his hairiness...his clothing of lion-skin, the head of which covered his own head and made him resemble a rampant lion, his club hacked out of a tree instead of being artificially made like a spear or arrows.", op. cit. p. 206. As we can see, in this reading of the myth, the figure of Hercules corresponds to the broader pattern of Graves' poetic career.

31. The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 106. To my irritation, Graves is not uniform in his adoption of the spelling of the hero's name. The tendency in the prose is to refer to him as 'Heracles', while in the poetry it is 'Hercules'. I have tried to follow Graves' procedure and relate my spelling to the particular aspect of Graves' work being discussed.

32. Ibid p. 106.

33. Eliade, Shamanism, considers several examples of lion-shamans, particularly among the circumpolar peoples whose totem-animal tends to be the cougar.

34. The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 280.

35. The Greek Myths Vol 2, p. 206.

36. The White Goddess, pp. 314-19.

37. Robert Graves, Mammon and the Black Goddess (London, 1965), p. 155.

38. Collected Poems, p. 233. The poem also appears in Mammon and the Black Goddess, p. 155.

39. Animal-transformation shamanism is discussed in Eliade, op. cit. pp. 30, 97-102, 144, 149, 153, 167. See also, G.M Vasilievich, "The Acquisition of Shamanistic Ability among the Evenki", in V. Dioszegi (ed), Popular Beliefs and Folklore Tradition in Siberia (Budapest, 1968), pp. 345-46; Ivar Lissner, Man, God and Magic (London, 1961), pp. 272-73; G.N. Gracheva, "A Nganasan Shaman Costume", in V. Dioszegi and M. Hoppal (eds), Shamanism in Siberia (Budapest, 1978), p. 323. It is interesting to note that the moment of transformation is, in many cases, preceded by a sleep. Similarly, as I noted above, the arrival of the Goddess in Graves' poems frequently occurs on the border between sleep and waking (See above, pp. 205ff). See J. Balazs, "The Hungarian Shaman's Technique of Trance Induction", in Dioszegi, op. cit. p. 59; A.A. Popov, "How Sereptic Djaruoskin of the Ilganasans (Tavgi Samoyeds) Became a Shaman", Ibid p. 139; Andreas Lommel, The World of the Early Hunters (London, 1967), p. 69.

40. The White Goddess, p. 136; The Greek Myths Vol 2, pp. 150-52.

41. The Crowning Privilege, p. 214.

42. See above, "The Poet's Birth", p. 34.
43. The White Goddess, p. 126.
44. Ibid pp. 125-26.
45. See Graves' discussion of the ballad "Robin and Gandelyn", English and Scottish Ballads, pp. 149-50.
46. The White Goddess, pp. 127-32.
47. Collected Poems, p. 175.
48. See Goodbye To All That, p. 181.
49. This would be the manner in which a Jungian reading would classify Graves' obsessions. See Erich Neumann (trans. Ralph Manheim), The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype (London, 1955), pp. 153-57. Mehoke makes reference to such a reading, op. cit. pp. 32-37.
50. The Greek Myths Vol 2, p. 107.
51. The White Goddess, pp. 196-99.
52. The Greek Myths Vol 2, p. 142.
53. Ibid pp. 142-43.
54. The White Goddess p. 140.
55. Ibid p. 232.
56. Ibid p. 113.
57. Collected Poems, p. 378.
58. The White Goddess, p. 113.
59. Quoted by Day, op. cit. p. 105n. No source listed.
60. The Greek Myths Vol 2, p. 206.
61. Cornford, op. cit. pp. 198-200.
62. Ibid pp. 198-200.
63. See above, pp. 79ff.
64. The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 114. Speculation as to the origins and functions of the Orpheus myth continue to rage. The leading English authority, M.L. West confirms the antiquity of the 'eus' name, and identifies Orpheus as a shaman-figure in whose life-story are recorded the various stages of the shaman's mastery of travel between the worlds - principally the descent into the underworld, and the return. See his The Orphic Poems (Oxford, 1983), pp. 4-7, 143-50, 259. There are clearly links between this Orpheus and the Mercury-Lug figure identified throughout pagan Europe: See Zeitschrift fur Celtische Philologie (Tubingen, 1960/61), xxxi, p. 57. The idea of the shaman-Orpheus acting as both priest and victim at the ritual over which he presides is attested by a more recent study of shamanism: Joan

Halifax, Shaman: The Wounded Healer (London, 1982), pp. 28-34.

It is clear that the "higher" Orphism of the Pythagoreans, with its emphasis upon contemplation as a means of escaping the world, was strongly influenced by Indic thought: See Karl Kerényi, "Die orphische Kosmologie und der Ursprung der Orphik", Eranos-Jahrbuch 1949 (Zurich, 1950), pp. 53-78. I am grateful to Anne Rennie, a research student in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Stirling, for pointing out this article to me, and for providing me with a working translation of it.

65. See above, pp. 228-32.

66. The Golden Fleece, p. 125.

67. The White Goddess, p. 140.

68. Robert Graves, "The Fellow'd Year", To Whom Else?, p. 2. A fellow is the circular rim of a wheel into which the outer ends of spokes are inserted. The image of a spoked wheel beautifully suggests the ever-turning cycle of stations through which moves the life of the sacred king.

69. A term coined by Martin Heidegger, Ueber den Humanismus (Frankfort, 1949), p. 13. It means "having been thrown".

70. The White Goddess, p. 140.

71. The Golden Fleece, p. 159.

72. Collected Poems, p. 159. The poem appeared originally in The Golden Fleece, pp. 159-61.

73. Jane Harrison, Prolegomena, pp. 573-99; Themis, pp. 463-66.

74. See above, pp. 280ff.

75. Poetic Craft and Principle, p. 177. I do not offer the gnostic parallels gratuitously. High gnosticism exhibits many affinities with Orphism, particularly the key to redemption through knowledge. Seymour-Smith tells us that Graves was "a student of Gnosticism from his schooldays"; op. cit. p. 149.

76. The White Goddess, p. 140.

77. Ibid p. 369.

78. The Greek Myths Vol 1, p. 28.

79. See above, pp. 280-81.

80. The White Goddess, p. 219. This passage seals the identification of Orpheus with Dionysus. Zuntz insists that in the Mysteries the adept never came to be identified with the god. Discussing this formula, he argues that the "contexts suggest that this formula must somehow denote the attainment of a supreme good." See Gunther Zuntz, Persephone: Three Essays on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia (Oxford, 1971), pp. 324, 325-27.

81. See above, pp. 351-52. The ability to overcome the subjective experience of time-as-decay is now recognized as a powerful feature of the mythological treatment of time. Psychologists relate this capacity of myth to its origins in fantasy. See Herbert Fingarette, The Self in Transformation (New York, 1963), p. 207: "The sense of "presence", of nearness in subjective time is generated then, when any object or situation is cathected by the currently mobilized drives and when it plays a significant role in the dominant drive-fantasy complex...The current perceptions incorporated are then preceived as "real"; the memories, though perhaps locatable in long past (calendar) time, are, in subjective time, "as if it happened yesterday". The capacity of story to disrupt the experience of linear time is attested by Stuart Albert and William Jones, "The Temporal Transition from Being Together to Being Alone: The Significance and Structure of Children's Bedtime Stories", in Bernard S. Gorman and Alden E. Wessman (eds), The Personal Experience of Time (New York, 1977), pp. 112-33.
82. Gregory Dix, The Shape of the Liturgy (London, 1946), p. 161. Quoted by David Jones, The Anathemata (London, 1972), p. 205, for whom these ideas were also very important.
83. Alan W. Watts, Myth and Ritual in Christianity (Boston, 1968), p. 108. This is an accurate summing-up of the Perennialist position on the meaning of the sacrifice of the omophagia.
84. Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York, 1963), p. 18.
85. See above, pp. 16-17.
86. Mammon and the Black Goddess, p. 158.
87. Ibid p. 162.
88. G.S. Fraser, op. cit. p. 134.
89. These poems may be found in Mammon and the Black Goddess, pp. 148-64, as well as in Collected Poems. I discuss a selection of poems from the lecture and from the relevant sections of Collected Poems.
90. Mammon and the Black Goddess, p. 158.
91. Ibid, p. 159.
92. Poetic Craft and Principle, pp. 134-35. This may be taken as further credence for Graves' commitment to the magical account of desire.
93. Collected Poems, p. 251.
94. Mammon and the Black Goddess, p. 159.
95. Collected Poems, p. 264.
96. Mammon and the Black Goddess, p. 159.
97. Collected Poems, p. 272.
98. Ibid p. 264.

99. Mammon and the Black Goddess, p. 151.

100. Collected Poems, p. 258.

101. Ibid p. 283.

102. See above, pp. 87-88.

103. See Kirkham, op. cit. pp. 241-69; Canary, op. cit. pp. 125-37. Of course, comparatively little work has been done on the Black Goddess, or Graves' later poetry.

104. This is Canary's contention, especially: Ibid.

105. Anthony Parise, The Private Myth in the Work of Robert Graves, unpublished Phd diss. (University of Wisconsin, 1963). This is a curiously argued study. Parise recognizes that the mythology is religious in inspiration, but does not follow through this insight. Instead, he prefers to see it as a system of symbolism for organizing Graves' own psychological crises. He makes no real effort to penetrate the mythology, or to understand the motifs in their own terms.

106. Daniel Hoffmann, Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves and Muir (New York, 1967), pp. 182-225.

107. The Jungian approach is pursued most assiduously by Mehoke, op. cit. Unfortunately, it leads Mehoke to conclude that Graves believes in reincarnation. op. cit. p. 157. He seems unaware of Graves' explicit denial of a belief in reincarnation: See Robert Graves, "Reincarnation", The Crane Bag and other disputed subjects (London, 1969), pp. 75-88.

108. The Frazerian approach is, of course, vastly overworked by Vickery, op. cit. See also his The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough (Princeton, New Jersey, 1973), which is rather more temperate in its claims, but makes only passing reference to Graves.

109. "Tomorrow's Envy of Today", Collected Poems, p. 318.

110. "What Will Be, Is", Ibid p. 321.

111. "Loving True, Flying Blind", Ibid p. 332.

112. "Child With Veteran", Ibid p. 407.

113. "The Hoophoe Tells Us How", Ibid p. 455.

114. "Under the Olives", Ibid p. 203.

115. Ibid p. 309.

116. Ibid p. 314.

117. Ibid p. 352.

118. Ibid p. 415.

119. "Nothing Now Astonishes", Ibid p. 324.

120. See T.F. Hoad, The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology (Oxford, 1986), p. 25.

121. The White Goddess, pp. 138, 245. See above, pp. ~~44~~-50
122. Collected Poems, p. 205. Several of the motifs of this poem are traced to their mythological sources by David Ormerod, "Graves' 'Apple Island'", Explcator, 32 (1974), item no. 53.
123. The White Goddess, p. 258.
124. "Black", Collected Poems, p. 306.
125. Ibid p. 352.
126. Ibid p. 158.
127. The White Goddess, p. 267.
128. "At the Gate", Collected Poems, p. 540.
129. Robert Graves, "Twin to Twin", Two Poems by Robert Graves (London, 1977), n.pag. A privately-printed limited edition on hand-made paper - not available in any collection.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this account of Robert Graves' mythopoesis with some final reflections on the principal tropes and imagery through which the vision of the Goddess is expressed.

I laboured to show that the whiteness of his Goddess was, for Graves, a deeply ambivalent, self-deconstructing figure. It appears to be, on one reading, the white radiance of divinity, the bright light of an all-pervading feminine influence, infusing nature and human relations with her numinous presence. However, it is a whiteness which also possesses significant and revealing associations with a barren, desolate winter landscape peopled by ruined figures which are projections of the self's defeat by the baffling power of nature. It is the whiteness of the empty sky and of glacial ice, when the mind of the poet seeks vainly for the afterglow of a lost divinity. It is the white corruption of leprosy, the white non-being of the ghost who symbolizes the memory of a past that was never a present...

Above all, the whiteness of the White Goddess is the blank of the snowfield which obscures all difference, and upon which the Goddess is manifest only as a 'trace' or 'track' or 'mirage' - marks on the blank whiteness of the unwritten page which call into question her status as an image or trope:

Sister of the mirage and echo...

Seeking her out at the volcano's head,
Among pack ice, or where the track had faded...

Much snow is falling, winds roar hollowly...

Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow...

But the smile of sorrow, a wan winter landscape
Hedges freaked with snow...

He prophesied more snow, and worse than snow...

The hedges high in snow, and owls raving...

This cento of extracts from the poems coalesces most meaningfully around the vast and ambiguous simile of "Like Snow" - a poem it would benefit us to glance at once again:

She, then, like snow in a dark night,
Fell secretly. And the world waked
With dazzling of the drowsy eye,
So that some muttered 'Too much light',
And drew the curtains close.
Like snow, warmer than fingers feared,
And to soil friendly;
Holding the histories of the night
In yet unmelted tracks.¹

In retrospect, we can see that the snow which falls in a dark night is a metonym for the Goddess, into which is compacted the sense of her beauty, her all-pervasive presence, and her dangerous remoteness from the warmth and vitality of human life. The rational eye fears its confrontation with this presence. It distrusts a figure invested or burdened with so much meaning, turning away from the radiance of "'Too much light'", in a gesture which is a prophylactic act-of-closure, drawing the curtains close, blotting out the "dazzling", overwhelming possibilities of Graves' grandest trope.

The "drowsy eye" may indeed anticipate or recall (remember, in Graves' mythology the two acts represent the same abolition of temporality) the hypnagogic dream-state of the shaman-trance, when the barrier surrounding the forces of the unconscious, and the primitive mysteries of the occult self, is thrown down. The cleansed perception looks upon the blank parchment of the snow and sees inscribed upon it obscure hieroglyphs, and signs, "the histories of the night" marked out "In yet unmelted tracks"; a powerful metaphor for the mysterious processes by which language represents to reason the presence of the Goddess as a track or trace on the page, which constantly eludes the grasp of reason's inadequate categories. Like all endlessly-deferred versions of a transcendental signifier, approach can be made to the Goddess

only through an immense array of similes and metaphors. These are not simply approximations of the ineffable. They betray something of the profound ambiguity of the concept in question - perhaps of the process of metaphorization itself as it is destined to evolve in explicitly mythopoeic writing.

The force of the accumulation of similes, metaphors, traces, marks is that it obliges us to interpret the ineffability of the Goddess as a meaningful function within a larger semiotic system. This ambivalence of the Goddess, if that is how we must characterize a signifier that is its own signified, is what supplies signification, I would contend, to the entirety of Graves' mythology. A possible reaction to the enigma of original signification, and one that Graves certainly assayed, is to search out in language an ever-expanding series of signifiers in the hope that one or the sum of them all might recuperate the lost original signifier-signified, the Goddess herself. At its most decadent, this produces mere Word-magic, a Hermeticism akin to the abstruseness of the eighteenth-century sentimental mythographers. Graves' weakest poetry disintegrates into a mere esoteric conjuring with names and epithets which seeks to invoke power by a simple appeal to a highly dubious vocabulary of the sacred, employed talismanically to revive a long-redundant religious heritage. However, at its best, Graves' poetry is a singular poetry, not only because it reproaches the limitations of a whole intellectual tradition in modern thought, but also because it frequently speaks of the Goddess as a phenomenon present precisely by virtue of her absence, as a trace which witnesses to what is no longer there or is yet to be.

The desolation of this absence is the heart of Graves' winter vision: the point of deepest doubt which is also, almost, the moment of rebirth; the solstice-time that is really no time at all. For there is indeed

one story and one story only, but it is recorded in characters which, by their evasion, constantly menace its truth claims.

Another twentieth-century poet, who ventured into "the mind of winter" in order to bring forth his account of the redemptive power of the imagination, supplies us with a fitting commentary on Graves' snow:

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.²

The self-confessedly "anti-mythological" Stevens reminds us that the "nothing" of winter is to the imagination an infinite resource. However, he recognizes simultaneously that the negational properties of white can too often suggest that the axis of vision diverges from the axis of nature, "The dominant blank, the unapproachable"; that "A blank underlies the trials of device":

Whether fresher or duller, whether of winter cloud
Or of winter sky, from horizon to horizon.
The wind is blowing the sand across the floor...

Here, being visible is being white,
Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment
Of an extremist in an exercise...

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall.
The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand...³

Robert Graves could be just such "an extremist in an exercise", a "man who...turns blankly on the sand". "The dominant blank, the unapproachable" of his work is the White Goddess, the principle of desire and despair throbbing at the heart of his poetry; yet also, perhaps, burdened with a weight of imaginative significance which exposes her as the "blank" which "underlies the trials of device" unwinding through his work.

She is also, especially in Graves' later work, a "whiteness which grows less vivid", as the vision of the shaman-poet darkens with

the lengthening shadows of Wisdom, Night and Death. The Orphic voice celebrates the transformation of white into the metonym of absence and abandonment:

Black drinks the sun and draws all colours to it.
I am bleached white, my truant love. Come back,
And stain me with intensity of black.⁴

White as absence, black as presence, reversing the logic of the rational eye by insisting on the priority of Black, which is not loss of colour, but excess, fullness, unity of being. We have here what Freud would have called antithetical primal words, as white, black, blank, regress to their common primitive etymon in the Indo-European root bhel, to flash or shine-forth.

The shaman-poet recognises the identity of opposites, exists in the realm of enantiodromia, where all polarised phenomena exhibit the propensity to go over to their opposites. One of the earliest shaman-figures to appear in Graves' writings is the murderer Crossley, villain of "The Shout".⁵ Revered as a witch-doctor by the Australian tribe who tutor him in the skill of the death-shout, Crossley possesses what modern anthropologists would call a "bush soul": he can project his soul into other creatures and inanimate objects at will. But Crossley's soul becomes inextricably tied to that of another man, and, seeking refuge in a stone, is smashed into four pieces by his rival.

The shaman-figure or persona in Graves' work is always a divided being, torn into pieces by his rejection of the rational universe, his ability to commute freely between material and spiritual worlds, and his loyalty to a barbaric Lunar Muse who offers both love and betrayal. Devotion to the treacherous Muse summons up a rival, or second self or weird who promises only an eternally-recurring cycle of mutual destruction.

Yet the wisdom of the shaman-poet is perfect freedom, offered to

an epoch which does indeed seem to have lost that synthesis of magic and reason which, Graves' poetry urges, is a necessary condition of our salvation as individuals and as communities. The process by which the White Goddess passes over into her opposite, the Black Goddess, is intended as a faithful allegory of the experience of love as it animates the lives and accomplishments of men and women everywhere. The values of poetic love, and the rehabilitation of the much-denigrated virtues of Woman, are intended as physic to the ailments of our age.

Graves' vision may be incomplete, fragmentary, self-contradictory. His humanism may be suspiciously naive. Nevertheless, we can honour his intention, and recognize in his undertaking as an artist the authentic continuation into our own time of the dangerous memory of myth, its capacity for renewing our sensitivity to the marvellous yet fearful influences which surround and penetrate us singularly revitalized. The language of myth can be used to enlarge our understanding as individuals and as cultures. Dedicated to an account of poetry which sought just such ends, Robert Graves spoke that language with eloquence and probity, and, through its unstable yet subversive metaphors, succeeded in articulating a critique of technological man which can stand with the best in modern literature.

Notes to Conclusion

1. Collected Poems, p.111. See above, p. 191.
2. Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man", Collected Poems, p.9.
3. "The Auroras of Autumn", Ibid p.12.
4. Robert Graves, "Black", Collected Poems, p.306.
5. Robert Graves, "The Shout", Collected Short Stories (London, 1965), pp. 3-24.

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