# Paul Blackburn and the White Goddess

In the summer of 1954, on his first trip to Europe, before going on to Toulouse to take up his Fulbright position, Paul Blackburn (1926-1971), met Robert Graves on a street in Mallorca (Buckeye 61-62). At this time Blackburn had published only about a dozen original poems and even fewer translations (Woodward 19, 51). Apparently the two poets did nothing more than say hello. Nevertheless, the incident probably prompted Blackburn to think about Graves's work, since a few subsequent poems show clear borrowings from the mythology of *The White Goddess* (1948). The influence of Graves on Blackburn has been mentioned briefly by George Butterick (159) and Edith Jarolim (Blackburn 1985: xxviii-xxix), and in somewhat more detail by Clayton Eshleman (1974: 644-45).

In his interviews, Blackburn does not mention any debt to Robert Graves (Osmann 1963; Craft Interview 1970; Interview 1972). Not surprisingly, the overall significance of Graves's influence on Blackburn has been overlooked, most likely because Blackburn is consistently regarded as a poet carrying on the tradition of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson (Simmons 215; Davidson 105-06; Paul Christensen 194). Because of his early contributions to *Black Mountain Review*, he has also been associated with the Black Mountain Poets, such as Robert Creeley, whom he knew on Mallorca.

Among critics who do point out the mythopoetic side of Blackburn's writing, Eric Mottram (194-95) mentions his use of the Barbaric Wanderer myth in the late 1960s—by which time the influence of Graves had waned. Annalisa Goldoni (392) remarks on his fascination with Mercury's creation of the alphabet, but without noting the intermediary of Graves's mythological system. Ross Feld (84) declares that even in his city poems Blackburn cannot help but mythologize his subject matter, but Feld is more interested in hearing the echoes of Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg in these poems than in finding the legacy of the symbolist tradition. [1]

In the present essay, Blackburn's four most complex poems indebted to *The White Goddess* will be analyzed individually followed by a discussion of how they relate to the use of mythology in shorter, earlier poems. Mention will be made of about twenty poems by Blackburn, only a handful out of the 523 in the *Collected Poems* [2]. The key White Goddess poems are these: (1) "Venus, the Lark Flies Singing Up/ Blue Smoke Blue Gull The/ Year Has Come Full Circle"; (2) "The Vine. The Willow/ Lurch to and fro"; (3) "The Watchers"; and (4) "Name Cast into the Tree Alphabet for/ Matthew Craig Eshleman/ Born at Lima, Peru, February 22 (?), 1966." The first two poems, begun in 1958 and published in 1961, represent an attempt by Blackburn to justify what he sees as his suffering at the hands of women in a world of disturbing relationships.[3] Thus they exemplify the masochistic element of Blackburn's poetry, noted by Eshleman (1989: 3-5), but generally ignored elsewhere. The later two poems, written in the 1960s, far less intense and personal, use Graves's mythology to give meaning, in "The Watchers" to construction work on a New York City street, in "Name Cast" to the day of one's birth and the first letters of one's given names. [4]

Blackburn's White Goddess poems all appeared after Graves's *Collected Poems 1955*, which included at least sixteen which belonged to the cycle. Graves was first struck by the White Goddess mythology while working on the novels *Hercules, My Shipmate* (1945) and *King Jesus* (1946), and he published his full treatment of the mythology in *The White Goddess* (1948; rev. ed. 1958). In his explication of Blackburn's two White Goddess poems which spell out riddles, Blackburn's friend Clayton Eshleman writes that Blackburn uses the Druid tree alphabet in a "kind of serious parody" of Graves. According to Eshleman, in "Venus, the Lark...," written in 1958, the year his first marriage broke up with much bitterness, the decoded images spell out NNIFFRREDDG, a symbol for Winifred ("Freddie") Grey, his wife. Eshleman finds that the "axle of the poem, the spit on which the poet is burned alive at midsummer, as was Frazer's oak King of Nemi, is [Blackburn's] attempt to join a shattering personal loss with a larger mythological context." Indeed, Blackburn even claimed to have died that year (Eshleman 1974: 644). The second riddle poem of the same year, "The Vine. The Willow..." uses the Druid alphabet to spell out MICHELLES, a reference to the painter Michelle Stuart, who did the cover for *The Nets* (1961) in which these poems appeared. For Eshleman, the second poem turns not on destruction but on rebirth (1974: 644).

In his introduction to *The Parallel Voyages* (1987: 10) Eshleman indicates that Blackburn had an affair with Michelle Stuart when he returned to New York in 1957, and that she was married at the time. Seven of the poems in *The Parallel Voyages*, ones he did not choose for publication during his lifetime, are dedicated to her. According to Eshleman (1975: 44), the divorce settlement with Freddie had cost Blackburn a burdensome amount of money, so it is not surprising to see the two women mentioned in the two poems of 1958. We should note that the use of the White goddess mythology does not allow the reader simply to read one poem as an attack on his estranged wife and the other as a hymn to his lover. Such an interpretation ignores the various forms taken by the White Goddess, from nurturer to destroyer. In addition, it should be stated that although "Venus, the Lark Flies Up..." does refer to Freddie, the riddle actually spells out UINIFREDG, not NNIFFRREDDG, thus giving us nine letters, as in

MICHELLES. Nine is a number especially sacred to Graves's White Goddess (1958: 28-29).

In "Venus, the Lark Flies Singing Up/ Blue Smoke The/ Year Has Come Full Circle" Blackburn uses the Beth-Luis-Nion alphabet of the ancient Druids at face value. He does not parody Graves, but he moves in a different direction from his mentor. In the White Goddess poems of *Poems 1955* we do not find examples of riddles original with Graves based on the Druid alphabet. Graves in *The White Goddess* is concerned with explicating the seasonal cycle which organizes the Druid alphabet as a means to identify the story of the dying and resurrected king. He does not use it as a set of blocks for spelling out messages, as Blackburn does, with one block per stanza. To communicate the general aura of his relationships with Winifred and Michelle, Blackburn takes the letters of their names and attaches them to certain carefully selected motifs from Graves. In the process he uses images and even phrases that are borrowed without modification from his source. Although some letters have distinctly negative connotations, for other letters Blackburn stresses either their sad or joyful qualities to suit his attitude toward each woman. This approach, of course, would not have been possible had not Graves compiled so many images for most of the letters.

To relate the two riddle poems Blackburn makes surprising reversals in the last stanzas of each. "Venus, the Lark...," which has been haunted by images of death, ends with a stanza about rejoicing. In contrast, "The Vine. The Willow..." has in its last stanza an image of the poet drowning, although he had successfully passed through trials earlier in the poem. Thus, we are not asked to think that Blackburn's life would have been better had he never met Winifred, even if he thought of 1958 as the year of his death. Instead, the different type of pain in each affair is accepted as part of life.

The Beth-Luis-Nion alphabet uses the first letter of trees as a mnemonic device, and it is composed of thirteen consonants (corresponding to thirteen lunar months) and five vowels. Both the consonants and the vowels form seasonal cycles from winter through spring, summer, and autumn and then back to winter. The letters run like this: B L N F S H D T C M G P R A O U E I. As there is no W in this alphabet, for WINIFRED, Blackburn changes W to U.

When the alphabet is adapted to the riddles, names which have a preponderance of the letters C, M, G, P, R, E, and I in them may give off an aura of decay, death, or sadness, because of their association with the fall and winter months. WINIFRED contains two I's (autumn) and an E (winter). Furthermore, it has the R, corresponding to the thirteenth month at the end of the year, the days extending from Nov. 25 to Dec. 22.

Graves relates each consonant not only to a tree and a twenty-eight day period, but to a precious stone, a bird, a color, and a tribe of Judah, as well as to a line in the "Song of Amergin." Furthermore, following tradition, he positions all eighteen letters on drawings of the five fingers of the left hand. In the two poems Blackburn uses images from each category, and he never feels obligated to create a rigid consistency by keeping to the same categories in stanza after stanza.

In the poem's title, we see that the year has come full circle from summer to spring because the lark is associated with summer, U; blue smoke with G, October 1-29; and blue gull with F, February 19-March 18 (Graves 1958: 324-26). The cyclical movement reinforces the idea that the suffering that Winifred has caused does not lead to Blackburn's permanent death. The first stanzas contain no surprises, as U is associated with summer, and I with death and entombment (Graves 1958: 199-201).

In the third stanza, N, Blackburn describes the cold March wind blowing over the sea, a sorrowful image. He chooses not to connect N, February 18-March 18, with the ash, which is a tree of rebirth in British folklore (Graves 1958: 172). An ash standing at Killura was considered a charm against drowning, and as we have noted, the poet drowns at the end of the companion poem, "The Vine. The Willow..." The winter solstice appears in the fourth stanza, I, with the "Tree of Ross," or yew (Graves 1958: 201-02), the death tree. It is the first time any tree is mentioned at all, since I, in the second stanza, signified death by means of the image of Cerberus, the "three-headed bitch of Death" (Graves: 1958: 455) rather than by the yew tree.

Stanzas 5-7 are also gloomy ones. When Blackburn uses the fire-garnet for F in stanza 5, he does not give the positive connotation of this fire, which frees the world from the water of the spring floods (Graves 1958: 292). Similarly, he mentions the alder, but not in the context of resurrection (Graves 1958: 175). So the image of the gull crying over the quiet waters leaves us with a feeling of loss rather than renewal. In stanza 6, the elder tree, R, is connected like the yew with hanging (Graves 1958: 191-92). It falls in the thirteenth month, and it is the tree of doom. The omen seems especially bad, since Blackburn notes that this month begins one day after his birthday, November 24. The bleak tone is carried onward by the brief stanza 7, represented by E, the autumn of life.

Blackburn elaborates the most on D, in stanza 8, describing the midsummer fertility ritual sacrifice of the sacred oak-king, who is translated to the Corona Borealis presided over by the White Goddess (Graves 1958: 185):

> The oak door looks forward and backward, outward
> and inward St. John is the day of our burning
> Verbena is the odor of our burning. sweet smell of
> scorched flesh. holocausts in all the crossroads.
> Death at midsummer... (CP 113)

Blackburn stresses the cyclical nature of the ritual by pointing out, "The king is dead!/ Long live the king!/ burnt" (CP 113).

We carry over the celebration of the new king's arrival in stanza 9, G, which begins "Gaiety? O yes, drink the unmixed wine and rejoice, but/rejoice in the blue haze on the hills" (CP 114). Rejoicing is associated with the bacchanals of September 30-October 27. The muteness of the swan here is not glossed by Graves to indicate sorrow (326), but to distinguish one swan from another kind of swan. the poem ends with the line, "The year comes down" (CP 114), not an indicator of destruction but a reminder of the seasonal cycle presented in the tilte.

The ending of ":Venus. The Lark..." echoes that of Graves's poem, "The White Goddess" (1955: 243), which along with "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," is probably the best known and appreciated of the poems in this cycle. Graves's poem also asks us to be joyful in spite of bleak November:

> 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.
> (1955: 243)

In Graves's poem, whereas the natural world rejoices with the Goddess in the appropriate seasons, only reasoning men can celebrate her even when the signs at first seem unpropitious. Although this dedicatory poem to the Goddess does not specifically connect poetry with the truth any more than does Blackburn's "Venus. The Lark...," Graves does equate poetry with truth given the proviso, "Fact is not truth, but a poet who willfully defies fact cannot achieve truth" (1958: 238). In *Robert Graves and the White Goddess*, John B. Vickery underlines Graves's "feeling that truth is a divine attribute and one worth worshipping" (62). In contrast, Blackburn makes "Venus. The Lark..." more autobiographical and less concerned with universal truth than Graves's White Goddess poetry.

By providing what Eshleman calls a cosmological context for personal loss, Blackburn bypasses the specific problems of the husband and wife, allowing the reader no chance to apportion blame. The poem appeared in the collection called *The Nets;* as in another famous poem from this volume, "The Purse-Seine," it alludes to love as a net. Blackburn, as he reveals in his last interview, saw any love relationship as a trap, although he allowed the possibility of freeing oneself through a well-chosen entrapment (Interview 138). This volitional servitude, which can easily slip into or cover up for masochistic problems, is adaptable to Graves's ideas about the relevance of the White Goddess to contemporary life.

In the lecture, "The White Goddess," delivered in New York City, partially in response to Randall Jarrell's criticisms of the earlier book with the same name, Graves explains:

> By ancient religious theory the White Goddess becomes incarnate in her human representative—a priestess, a prophetess, a queen-mother. No Muse-poet can grow conscious of the Muse except by experience of some woman in whom the Muse-power is to some degree or other resident...A Muse-poet falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse.
> (1969: 243)

When the poet falls out of love, the power of the Muse-goddess departs. Graves implies that it is possible that the woman will fail to "take trouble to preserve whatever glory she gets from the knowledge of her beauty and the power she exercises over her poet-lover" (243). He avoids thinking about the obvious problem that the man may consciously or unconsciously set out to domesticate the Muse. In Graves's view, the goddess may "take up residence for a month, a year, seven years, or even longer" (243). Unfortunately, this belief may propel some men to exploit a multitude of women who may serve as potential Muses. These, however, are the problems of everyday life. On the cosmological level, the White Goddess poem for Winifred is a kind of no fault divorce. Considering the trauma of the break-up, the poem shows Blackburn in a forgiving and generous mood, albeit, simultaneously a non-introspective one.

Although in this first poem Blackburn as poet is never explicitly connected with the sacrificed king, in the second poem "The Vine. The Willow..." he uses the pronoun "I," speaking as if he were a bard in the manner of Taliesin, and thus a devotee of the goddess. The more distanced narrator of "Venus, the Lark..." is more easily assimilated to an Eliotic narrator pointing out the symbolism of the tarot cards. "The Vine. The Willow/ Lurch to and fro" is dedicated to the goddess and describes her attempt to kill the poet and his beloved. The vine is associated with M, and the willow with S, thus giving us Michelle Stuart's initials in the title. Lurching, or swaying to and fro, is also associated with S (Graves 1958: 137), and it summarizes the tension in the relationship.

In the first stanza, M, Blackburn does not speak about the appropriate tree, in this case, the vine, but rather presents himself as the "hill of poetry," as the "Song of amergim" records it (Graves 1958: 218). The poet becomes a lover in the second stanza, I, casting himself and his beloved as the heroes of *Naoise and Deirdre*. In this Irish romance "yew stakes were driven through the corpses of these lovers to keep them apart, but the stakes sprouted and became trees whose tops eventually embraced Armagh Cathedral" (202). The lovers make their escape as salmon in stanza 3, C, another reference to "The Song of Amergim" (226).

In stanza 4, H, the Goddess once again pursues the lovers. In the month of the hawthorn, the tree of enforced chastity (181), May 13-June 9, the temple images are scrubbed in preparation for midsummer (179) and its

sacrifice. The night crow brings terror to the lovers, for marriage is hateful to the Goddess. These attacks by the Goddess on the love affair probably reflect Michelle Stuart's married state and the problems that it caused for Blackburn. In the following four stanzas, E-L-L-E, the lovers escape for a second time. They use aspens to shield their heads and escape in a quickbeam boat. His helm is adorned with yellow chrysolite and her hair with poplar wreath.

In the concluding stanza, the poet suffers from a death by water arranged by the jealous Goddess:

> The moon owns us finally with wicker baskets,
> seats for chairs
> I'll wear a sprig of willow in my hat for
> charm
> tree that loves water best . and while I
> drown
> 16 hawks scream from the cliffs
> The meadows are fine-coloured in this month
> the thrush sings
> the bright new leaves are here. (CP 115)

Graves notes that the willow, S, October 16-May 13, which gives us the words `witch' and `wicker' was sacred in Greece to Hecate, Circe, Hera, and Persephone, all Death aspects of the Triple Moon-goddess, and much worshipped by witches" (1958: 177), A man who wore a willow in his hat used it as a charm against the Moon-goddess's jealousy (178). In this case, the charm does not work for Blackburn, and he dies anyway. However, S, the fifth Druid letter, takes us toward summer, and the thrush singing in the bright new leaves offers us an image of hope that transcends the poet's persecution and death.

The poem is followed by the Latin message: BENIGNISSIMA, SOLI TIBI CORDIS DEVOTIONEM QUOTIDIANAM FACIO, which is translated by Graves as "Most Gracious One to Thee alone I make a daily devotion of my heart (1958: 279). This formula is associated with the seven sacred trees of the Irish grove, birch B, willow S, holly T, hazel C, oak D, apple Q, and alder F. Thus the formula serves as a mnemonic device for the trees, each of which is also identified with one of the traditional seven heavenly bodies (279). It is this type of calendrical formula rather than the use of letters to make names which most fascinates Graves.

The meaning that reverence for the Goddess can give to a poet's life is expressed again in the less autobiographical "The Watchers." Published in *In. On. Or About the Premises* (1968), it relies heavily on Chapter XIII of *The White Goddess*, "Palamedes and the Cranes" (236-61), to connect poetry to the Cretan alphabet rather than the Phoenician model adapted by the Greeks. In the poem, Blackburn attempts to bring the world of the fertility rituals to a construction site in New York City.

According to Graves's scheme, the Cretans worshipped the Goddess, whereas the Greeks destroyed her worship and replaced her with the Olympians. Graves attacks the rational world of the Olympians in the first lines of his poem. "The White Goddess":

> All saints revile her, and all sober men
> Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean—(Graves 1955: 243)

Thus the trajectory of "The Watchers" is to wrest poetry from the hands of Apollo and give it back to the Goddess. This wish is made possible by reinterpreting the mechanical cranes on a New York City street. They become the birds which prompted Mercury to design the first seven letters of the alphabet from the various shapes they took in flight. This story is told in the *Fables* of Hyginus, who was exiled to Cadiz by Augustus Caesar (Graves 1958: 238). Hyginus also speaks of the other letters subsequently added by Palamedes, Epicharmus, and Simonides, all of whom are also mentioned prominently in "The Watchers."

Throughout the poem watchers in the street wait for rain to come and interrupt the men running the cranes, but it does not arrive until the last stanza. In contrast to the two previous poems, where Blackburn achieved his resonances by choosing from the images made available by Graves, here Blackburn directly lifts Graves's explanations of the myths for use in his poem. Because the watchers are fascinated by the capital letters in the names on the sides of the cranes they are declared to be "gods" at the end of the poem. In the last line, "The leaves burgeon," we have an echo of the fertility cycle. Whereas in "The Vine. The Willow..." the burgeoning leaves appear with the death of the poet, in "The Watchers" no suffering is required. All one has to do is see the earlier mythic world under the prosaic reality that the Greeks bequeathed to us. Autobiography is abandoned for exposition of Graves's poetic myth.

The next major poem of the White Goddess group, "Name Cast into the Tree-Alphabet for/ Matthew Craig Eshleman/ Born at Lima, Peru, February 22 (?), 1966.," is a magical offering which takes its power from the poet's devotion to the Goddess. Blackburn uses the Beth-Luis-Nion alphabet to guarantee a prosperous future for his friend's son. As in the other two poems using this alphabet, Blackburn picks and chooses from Graves's material to create the tone of the message he wants. Along with the letters standing for M C E, or Matthew Craig Eshleman, he adds the N, which represents the month of *nion* (ash), February 18-March 17, in which the child has been born. The opening lines of the poem tell us that we are in the season of winds on the deep waters (226). Although in the poem, the Goddess is mentioned specifically only once as the "goddess" who summoned Bran in the land of youth with

an apple branch" (CP 407), she presides over the poetic endeavor.

Blackburn describes his poem as an offering:

> The piece of brass has been given new strength
> The birch peg offered the suitor says
> `you may proceed' it can have a
> permanent-type effect . we know
> (CP 405)

The description of the poem as brass refers to Graves's belief that the Bronze Age smiths came under the direct patronage of the Muse. They "never embellished their work with meaningless decoration" (Graves 1958: 316). Every object they made had magical properties. Thus Blackburn's poem can have its "permanent-type effect" through magic. The birch peg represents his own letter, B, Blackburn, which is associated with the birch tree, and the infant is the suitor.

More of the poem wayward the letters M and C than E, perhaps because Graves seems to have less to say about E. In this poem, Blackburn does not distribute one letter per stanza but rather blends the three key letters in various stanzas. He gives these letters both by the tree names, *muin*, *coll* and *eadha*, and also by the names accorded them by Roderick O'Flaherty in his seventeenth-century *Ogygia*, a work which Graves explains and modifies (1958: 115). M, *muin*, the vine, in part because of its connection to wine, promises a life "full of joy and exhilaration/ & wrath" (CP 405). C, *coll*, or hazel, offers wisdom to those who eat its nuts. Since in one myth, the nuts are eaten by salmon, which gain spots in accordance with the number devoured, these fish become symbols of the life of contemplation. Graves calls Fionn (Finn) MacCool, Fionn the son of the hazel, and he describes his story:

> Fionn...was instructed by a Druid of the same name as himself to cook for him a salmon fished from a deep pool of the River Boyne, and forbidden to taste it; but as Fionn was turning the fish over in the pan he burned his thumb, which he put into his mouth and so received the gift of inspiration. For the salmon was a salmon of knowledge, that had fed on nuts fallen from the nine hazels of poetic art. (1958: 68)

Because Fionn is considered by Graves to be the equivalent of Gwion, he is associated also with Bran and the Cauldron of Cerridwen from which the Triple Muse was born (68).

The white poplar, E, *eadha* should bring young Eshleman "[p]assion, wisdom, and strength" (CP 408). It was the shield maker's tree, and it was used by Irish coffin makers to remind people that death is not the end of existence (201). In addition, the white poplar is associated with repose because of its position on the ring finger at the base of the digit. Graves (1958: 138) associates it (not without straining) with this quality because the Celtic god ESUS is shown in "a Gaulish bas-relief plucking festal branches, with a left hand where his right should be" (138).

All four of these White Goddess poems can be considered as constituting *bar clus*, the more hermetic poetry of the troubadours. Obviously, three of the four poems need to be decoded with a copy of *The White Goddess* at one's side, and "The Watchers" relies on Graves for its unusual version of the development of the alphabet. The weakness of the two later poems lies in the fact that Blackburn has gone in the direction of Pound rather than Graves insofar as he gives up lyricism in the process of conveying information. Although Graves's poems vary in quality, his attachment to rhyme and meter generally keeps him from offering dollops of information, which is not always true in Pound's *Cantos*.

In his earlier poetry, Blackburn tells us that he was trying to summon the gods, and his turning to the White Goddess mythology represents one outcome of that search. In "The Birds" {1949/1951}, perhaps the best of the pre-1954 poems, Blackburn says that when he was young he feared the approach of the gods, symbolized by the birds. They moved him "into song/instead of into living" (CP 7). However, now he feels that his poetry cannot improve unless he deepens his experience of life. He has learned to

> touch bottom to darkness where
> I no longer fear to ask much of the gods.
> It has taken me a long time to realise
> I want them to come here
> I want to see them here. (CP 7)

At this time, no goddess is mentioned specifically. However, considering Blackburn's belief that his poetry can only be improved by taking risks in his personal life, it is not surprising that he would turn to a mythology that could justify his suffering where he had the most problems--in his relationships with women.

From other early poems, we see that the White Goddess mythology also satisfied Blackburn's desire for a specific religious ritual as well as praise for something higher than himself. Thus, at the end of "The Odyssey" [1950/1951] he asks how the god Orion can be placated:

> Orion, unpropitious to sailors, how
> shall we cross your wintry seas?
> With what rites shall we enter the mountain cave
> in the change of year?
> Shall we drain the mixing bowl *a pascor*,
> the sweet time?
> [And Death? (CP 12)]

Rites are needed because the mythic is lodged behind the everyday. The entry into a subway tunnel, for example, is described in terms of sailing on the wintry sea. Since the

poet is the person who can see the timeless world behind the quotidian, he is the one who may escape death by water. However, by the time of the White Goddess poetry, his death by water is accepted as part of his submission to the Muse/Goddess.

In "You Ask Me Why" [1950/1952] the poet is not subjected to the cycle of the seasons as he will be in the White Goddess poetry. Instead, here he is responsible for creating spring for his beloved.

> I say this Spring is yours
> I planted it for you
> and come to terms with death each time I look
> and see how you know it and how you lower your head. (CP 12-13)

The death that Blackburn faces is the end of love through the incommensurability of his and the beloved's feelings. When she lowers her head in embarrassment at his adoration of her, he realizes that the end of the affair is near. Nevertheless, he feels that he has made himself a god through her. The later poems will make his subservience more central. He plants nothing; he becomes the slain king at midsummer.

In another presentation of his problem with women, "The Dissolving Fabric" [1954/1954], Blackburn appeals to a god to help him understand his failure to allow a woman her independence. He is wounded, and the fabric of his life is dissolving because he cannot attain a valid reciprocity:

> And there is no one, not the god
> who understood it.
> And the fact is that she withdrew it,
> the fact is that she owned it
>
> she possessed her own life, and took it. (CP 30)

In this poem the wound is not yet assimilated to those of the sacrificed god. It is still something to wonder about. Meaning is still connected to a masculine idea of reason not to a feminine life force.

In "Night Song for Two Mystics" [1955/1958], written during his first European stay, Blackburn addresses William Butler Yeats, while drawing upon a troubadour tradition. He sees himself as the man who has given up everything for his beloved, throwing all of the furniture out of the room so that it will contain only her. She is condemned for her pride, for she stands in a high place where she can be worshipped but not touched. He wonders why the situation leads to mythologizing:

> So you see where we stand, where you stood,
> Yeats?
> And must it always lead to gods?
> The man's shadow dissolves in shadows,
> Most men go down to obliteration
> with the homeliest of remembrances. (CP 61)

Just as Yeats would write a poem such as "No Second Troy" to make his loss of Maude Gonne more bearable for him, Blackburn would like to avoid going down to defeat in a prosaic love affair. He maintains that he is innocent, and asks what are the "positive virtues" that "seduce his wife,/ emasculate his god and general manager." The poem ends in evocative, but undeveloped Eliotic motifs of death by water and a world of dust. The innocence declared in this poem will be changed into the cosmic acceptance of the Goddess mythology.

In two other poems from the same period, "Myth, No Myth" and "The Problem," both dated [1956/1960] Blackburn again reflects on his desire to find a sustaining mythology. The first poem states that the image of the head of Orpheus floating to the sea is a very attractive one for today's poet, because Orpheus makes his most beautiful music "detached from the acts of his life/ and to no one" (CP 69). The poem reflects Blackburn's personal fear of a poetry which uses mythical images without having any real grounding in experience.

In "The Problem," Blackburn takes what is presumably a true incident from his life with Winifred. She broke a perfume bottle, and the Arab who fixed it insisted it was good luck, not bad. Blackburn comments wryly at the conclusion of this brief meditation:

> Sure it was
> To break any vessel is [good], if we know
> the appropriate formula to make it sacrifice
> and know a god
> to dedicate it to (CP 70)

Here the poet lacks not only an organizing mythology but also a religious dimension in his life. As a non-believer from a Catholic family, Blackburn probably felt moments of loss in Spain and southern France, where most of the people had more connection to formal religion than he himself did.

The White Goddess poems represent only a partial solution to the personal problems raised in Blackburn's early poetry. Ultimately, his often unhappy personal life could not be explained in terms of the mythology. According to Clayton Eshleman, Blackburn's real inspiration was the sky, sea, and air of southern Europe, to such a degree that the return to New York City in 1957 was a major blow to his poetic career (1975: 642), which went particularly downhill after 1963 (1975: 44). The importance of visible symbols of fertility in the landscape to Graves' system may have made the White Goddess mythology seem irrelevant, despite exceptions such as "The Watchers."

Graves's mythology was probably also increasingly unimportant to the journal form of Blackburn's later work, with its random and generally uninspired listings of the

minutiae of daily existence. One of the longer journals, the one dated "December 6, 1968" touches briefly on the Goddess mythology. There are two cats, named Isis and Osiris, and a "King, naked but for his crown,/[who] sits reclining in a large basket (CP 566). He may be the sacrificial king, as he is associated with an orgone box, symbol of fertility. However, the image is not developed, and, although it is repeated (CP 568), more attention is given to alchemy instead. Neither system of reference enables Blackburn to probe the ostensible *donnée* of the poem, his third wife's learning of her father's death during the winter that she is pregnant with Blackburn's only child. This and similar long but weak poems substantiate Clayton Eshleman's claim that in his last years Blackburn's inspiration waned.

The early poems show that Blackburn was trying to find the appropriate myth to give meaning to his experience. However, he did not find it in the White Goddess mythology. We can tell this from the fact that his use of the material from Graves is simultaneously intense and half-hearted. Blackburn was obviously caught up in Graves's ideas about the alphabet, symbol of poetry itself, as well as in the justification for suffering that the cosmos of the Great Goddess offered him, but it comes to him as a closed system. Blackburn shows an acute attention to details of various myths, but at the same time it is clear that he does not transform them into something entirely his own. Although Blackburn did not create his greatest poems out of this material, a study of it highlights the tensions he felt between real and symbolic events and between merited and undeserved suffering.

# Notes

1. Another set of critics stands opposed to Mottram, Goldoni, and Feld. Such an influential critic as Gilbert Sorrentino (64) writes that Blackburn's poems always accept the world as a given, thus deemphasizing the mythologizing strain in Blackburn's writing. Laurie Duggan (150) echoes this belief, claiming that Blackburn offers us the detail of the ordinary, never imposing an order on his material. On a related note Tandy Sturgeon (162) writes that the Lady in Blackburn's poetry is never derivative nor is her attitude toward her, thus overlooking the presence of the White Goddess.

2. The chronological presentation of Blackburn's poetry in Edith Jarolim's fine edition of 1985 has ironically failed to spur much new understanding of Blackburn as a poet. Not only does *The Collected Poems* separate poems that Blackburn would have kept together as thematic units (Conte 44), but with too many similar pieces it may also show that its 523 authorized poems comprise a whole which is less than the sum of its part (Perloff 198). In 1989, Jarolim put together the *Selected Poems*, which does more justice to Blackburn. It is also organized chronologically but with five groupings related to dates in Blackburn's life.

3. The blatant sexism and reductive machismo of some of Blackburn's poetry has been noted by both Edith Jarolim (Blackburn 1985: xxviii) and Marjorie Perloff (203). However, it is more disturbing in the urban American poems (*pace* M. R. Rosenthal's [41-43] comparison of "The Once-over" to the work of Peire Vidal) than in those that evoke Provence or Spain, for these often reflect the refinement of courtly love which is well-evoked in Blackburn's fine translations from the troubadours, collected in *Proensa* (1978). Here we get a good sense of the strong emotion in the poetry through a modern vocabulary and free verse (Apter 22-24).

4. In the textual apparatus of her dissertation edition of Blackburn's poems, Edith Jarolim indicates her belief that three short poems from 1958 also belong to the White Goddess set (Jarolim 1095-96). Each has less than twenty lines and does not sufficiently develop its theme. In "Homage to the Spirit," Blackburn figures himself as Hercules. The "Bk. of Numbers" briefly alludes to the significance of the numbers 3, 7, and 9. "Couplets" presents the poet as a gifted hunter and a crashing wave. See Blackburn 1985: 110-12.

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