

The White Goddess, or the poetry of poetry

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La mort des hommes est absoute par des images.

'Men's deaths will be absolved by images'

Gilbert Durand

Les mots sont des dieux, car les dieux ne sont rien d'autre que des mots.

'Words are gods, for the gods are nothing but words.'

Otto Rank

I. INTRODUCTION

In his afterword to *Swifter than Reason*, Douglas Day recalls his talk with Robert Graves in Washington D.C. in 1963 and Graves's remark that a genuine poet's poetry should be 'an accurate self-portrait' (Day, 216). Poetry cannot be detached from experience, as is suggested by the famous poem published in 1958, 'The Face in the Mirror': the poet's face becomes what Graves calls an 'icon' in *The White Goddess*. Icon is defined in the dictionary as: 'An image, figure, or representation; a portrait, an illustration in a book.' Of course, the notion of 'icon' is also religious and contains the idea of a sacred face. Through the poem, Graves's portrait becomes a verbal image that, like myth, is a reminder of fate and experience ('a foolish record of old world fighting'). The face has the same mystery and depth as myth: 'Grey haunted eyes, absent-mindedly glaring // From wide, uneven orbits.' The face's features mingle with the traces of experience ('Cheeks, furrowed'; 'Forehead, wrinkled and high') and reveal the soul's shape ('Jaw, pugilistic'; 'mouth, ascetic'). The poet's own face has become a poem that seems to live by itself and to induce questioning.

We also find that Graves's reflection on poetry cannot be severed from his personality as a whole. Moreover poetry for Graves is mostly a questioning of personality. In his study of Graves's poetry and criticism, Douglas Day insists on W.H. Rivers's influence on Graves especially as far as the 'conflict of unconscious personalities' is concerned. This deep interest of Graves's in the conflict of personalities is borne out by Madhuri Santanam Sondhi and Mary M. Walker in their article on Basanta Mallik and Graves:

A primary problem which engaged his attention was the phe-

nomenon of opposition and contrariety, as manifest in the conflicts within the psyche of the individual or in life situations between people. He believed that opposition, which he and Mallik both viewed as the stuff of reality, could be overcome by love. (126)

In *On English Poetry* (1922), Graves presents poetry as a 'tactful police report' written in self-protection to solve an internal conflict. The poet is himself both the disease and the cure, submitting himself to 'self-hypnotism, as practised by the witch-doctors, his ancestors in poetry' (*O.E.P.*, 26). Magic here comes out as appeasement of the soul. As early as 1922, Graves emphasises the link between magic and poetry:

One may think of poetry as being like Religion, a modified descendant of primitive Magic: it keeps the family characteristic of stirring wonder by creating from unpromising lifeless materials an illusion of unexpected passionate life. The poet, a highly developed witch-doctor, does not specialise in calling up at set times some one particular minor divinity, that of Fear or Lust, of War or Family Affection; he plays on all the emotions and serves as comprehensive and universal a God as he can conceive. (*O.E.P.*, 19)

The general development of *The White Goddess* is contained in these few lines:

... poetry is the drama in which 'all the emotions' are being staged. The magician who can get such an overall control of all the actors of his own life both serves and conceives the God he serves through such 'comprehensive and universal' dramatisation of experience.

Again, in *Poetic Unreason* (1925), poetry is viewed as a 'record of the conflicts between various pairs of Jekyll and Hyde, or as a record of the solution of these conflicts' (52). Poetry and experience are closely linked in the chapter entitled 'A Theory of Consciousness':

In the same way a poem will never be a copy of the poet's past life. It will be a new experience, but it will be continuous with his past life in the sense that but for this, it could itself never have come into existence. The precise form the poem will take cannot be known until it has taken that form. Non-conscious experience can never be dictated to by a predicting consciousness. (51)

Graves's insistence on the non-conscious aspect of poetic inspiration, the 'phases of consciousness' being 'each derived from moments of non-conscious activity' (*P.U.*, 50) discloses the Romantic influence he partially admits in *The White Goddess*. Here we may think of Keats's

'negative capability' and Coleridge's theory of imagination. The Romantic insistence on the unconscious source of poetic inspiration is broached by Otto Rank in his study on *Art and Artist*. Otto Rank sees it and the subsequent creation of a Muse to justify the poet's both creative and real lives as a response to the guilt induced in the artist by the fact that the sense of power he draws from his ability to create causes him to regard his power of creation as the mere expression of his pride. Rank accounts for the dual aspect of the artist's character through an opposition between the self-proclaimed and self-created artist who stands out of the community and the same artist who feels guilty of fancying himself so different from others.

Split personality is a recurrent theme in Graves's poetry from 'In the Wilderness' to 'My Name and I' to quote only two poems. Destructive pride is clearly dismissed in harsh terms in *The White Goddess*. At the end of the book, the Muse and the Destroyer face each other:

And we owe her a satire on the memory of the man who first tilted
European civilisation off balance, by enthroning the restless and
arbitrary male will under the name of Zeus and dethroning the
female sense of orderliness, Themis.' (486)

Pterseus the Destroyer is Hermes's foil in *The White Goddess*: P(t)erseus kills the Gorgon in Chapter 13 while Hermes learns from her the secret of the alphabet. The poet's character clashes against the warrior's.

Graves's self-portrait 'The Self in the Mirror' keeps the memory of the soldier he had been in his youth and also refers to the poet's undue pride that Rank mentions:

And once more ask him why
He still stands ready, with a boy's presumption,
To court the queen in her high silk pavilion.

Poetry discards the 'foolish record of old-world fighting' but the man who contemplates the poet, 'the mirrored man', finds it difficult to come to terms with such eccentricity even if some sort of pride jocularly comes across.

Therefore Graves depicts himself as bearing the stigmas of a tragic experience. His education led him to cast an ambivalent eye on his social self and to acknowledge a discrepancy between 'My Name and I': 'Yet, understand, I am not he // Either in mind or limb.' His tone is satirical as regards: 'This noun, this natal star, // This gentlemanly self.' Yet these fears and existential issues of a strict upbringing might have remained quite commonplace if they had not been revived and kindled by the nightmarish adventure of the First World War. The

experience bore a tragic outlook and Graves's symbolic apprehension of it became even more dramatised. Michael Kirkham thus describes Graves's verse of 1917: 'The symbolic rendering of the inner drama, the anecdotal rendering of his moral judgements on the outer world, and the use of irony' (27).

In this perspective, I think that one way of considering *The White Goddess* can be derived from Graves's own view of poetry as a record of inner conflicts, or the dramatisation of a tragic initiation. I must admit that being no anthropologist I am more interested in the symbolic truth contained in *The White Goddess* than in its contested historical accuracy. I agree with James Mehoke that 'Graves's experience with war and his vow to help avoid them in the future are central to an understanding of his theories' (35). Yet it is also true that 'the personal and impersonal combine in a mythic vision' (35). Through the symbolic record of his experience Graves achieves a genuine plea for poetry which is relevant in contemporary terms. As Daniel Hoffmann writes when speaking of 'The Second-Fated': 'Now, forty years later, he sees himself as having descended into the underworld of the dead - and come back, with supernatural knowledge and the gift of song' (11). We could say, following Otto Rank, that Graves had to relieve two types of guilt in writing *The White Goddess*, that of having been a soldier and having shared in collective murder, and that of still being a poet although no longer an adolescent even if his ironical self-awareness preserves him from overweening pride. He describes himself in his foreword to *The White Goddess* as 'the fox who has lost his brush' and yet never admits of any defeat. As D.N.G. Carter states, Graves's life and poetry was some sort of a heroic quest for truth:

Graves's life and work may be justly considered as a heroic attempt on the part of one man to wrest a personal salvation from a world turned upside-down, relying on no more than his own peculiar gifts and a belief that they are somehow connected with truth, with things in their right frame. (15)

Before proceeding though, it is necessary to define how Graves used the terms 'heroic' and 'truth'.

II. A TRAGIC INITIATION.

Reading *Goodbye to All That*, one feels that the war revived Graves's childhood fears giving them further tragic depth. The fear of the body, of sex, death and punishment is symbolically marked as red through-

out Graves's autobiography: the fear starts at school with a naked Irish boy's red hair; red reappears in the 'Red Lamp' or 'army brothel' on the Front. It is connected with the suffering of souls in Purgatory as exemplified on the ex-voto pictures in Bavaria and finally with death when Graves recalls Nietzsche's line in its French translation: 'Non, tu ne peux pas me tuer!' and adds: 'It was the poem about a man on the scaffold with the red-bearded executioner standing over him' (*Goodbye*, 181).

In *The White Goddess*, we find that red is mentioned as the 'colour of death in Greece and Britain during the Bronze Age' (*White*, 167). It is also the colour of the midsummer tree, heather, sacred to the goddess of love. Passion merges with the evocation of pain and castration under female rule:

The heather is the midsummer tree, red and passionate, and is associated with mountains and bees. The Goddess is herself a queen bee about whom male drones swarm in midsummer, and as Cybele is often pictured: the ecstatic self-castration of her priests was a type of the emasculation of the drone by the queen bee in the nuptial act. (*White*, 192)

The last month, in the bird calendar we find in Chapter 16, is blood red: 'And Blood-red are the rags of leaves on the elder-trees, a token of the slaughter' (*White*, 299). The war itself seems to take an ugly threatening face:

This morning about breakfast time, just as I came out of my dug-out, a rifle-grenade landed within six feet of me. For some reason, instead of falling on its head and exploding, it landed with its stick in the wet clay and stood there looking at me. (*Goodbye*, 96)

To complete the menacing image, Graves quotes a lance-corporal's letter home: 'This war is a booger' (*Goodbye*, 82).

The war takes the monstrous image of childish fears and male as well as female figures are viewed as strikingly dual throughout *Goodbye to All That* from infancy to the war years. Both father and mother are depicted as strong moralists. Yet Graves manages to play down his father's authority through considering him rather a grandfather than a father and he more or less dismisses him as a poet. Nevertheless the war is regarded as the sacrifice of the younger generation to the fears of the elder and takes the appearance of a bogeyman, recalling Freud's vision of the menacing father figure and the *Unheimlich* [unhomely, ed] in his essay on this subject. The mother's figure is also dual to a certain extent: we find the guardian of moral

standards on the one hand and the nurse on the other. This tallies with the typical duality Rank describes as the hero's predicament in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, the inaccessible mother on one side and the depreciated one on the other: 'In a practical way Emily came to be more to us than our mother. I did not despise her until about the age of twelve' (*Goodbye*, 20).

Another female character crops up during the war, that of the 'little mother' as found in the papers. She ardently justifies the sacrifice of her sons. This sentence, in the context of Graves's mythic elaboration is striking: 'There is only one temperature for the women of the British race, and that is *white heat*' (*Goodbye*, 189 [italics mine]). The sacrifice not only consisted in dying but also in accepting some sort of a retrogression into the fears of childhood. The civilised world turned into chaos and experience into hell.

The first striking element that induces this idea of retrogression is the emphasis Graves puts on the notion of falling as far as trench life is concerned. As soon as he got in the vicinity of the trenches, Graves had to throw himself flat on his face for fear of a shell. He describes later how he lost his sense of equilibrium through the vibrations of a shell whizzing past him and how he was ashamed to be found on all fours by the sergeant-major. It seems impossible to stand upright any longer. The fall contrasts with Graves's taste for climbing in his Charterhouse years. Moreover it runs counter to the ideal of high moral standards since all sense of personal dignity and freedom is being defeated: 'What I most disliked in the Army was never being alone, forced to live and sleep with men whose company, in many cases, I would have run miles to avoid' (*Goodbye*, 187).

On a symbolic level, this fall might be interpreted as a retrogression to the chaos of the unconscious. Darkness prevails with sudden flashes of dazzling light. Noises are so loud and cutting that they become nightmarish. What with the swarming of mice and lice and the gruesome spreading of death making visible the reality of bodies all over, all the familiar appearances of civilisation that covered the harsh crudities of life are crumbling and there remains only a fantastic world of superstition (*Goodbye*, 99-100). In his *Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Gilbert Durand describes these images of darkness, of the swarming of insects and the fall as visions of chaos and deep anxiety, usually opposed to symbols of light, war and power, destined to vanquish time, death or the dragon. These symbols reveal a conflict or duality. Moreover, to those reminders of our depressing human

predicament, the figure of the maze should be added, a symbol of the entrails disclosing the fear of the body, of time and death.

The trenches and the no man's land all around with all these entanglements of barbed wire and the shell craters filled with dead bodies, recall such a maze of fear and darkness with death at the very centre, a real vision of hell. The landscape itself comes to be the expressionistic echo of human distress and space is miniaturised to the dimensions of such subjective nightmare:

A Second Battalion officer who revisited these Laventie trenches after the war ended, told me the other day of the ridiculously small area of No Man's Land compared with its seeming immensity on the long, painful journeys that he had made over it. 'It was like the real size of a hollow in one's tooth compared with how it feels in the tongue.' (*Goodbye*, 110.)

Space therefore is cramped to the size of the soldiers' pain. Time is also reduced and the men are cooped up in some sort of eternity of suffering and boredom, as Graves suggests in his poem dedicated to Robert Nichols: in the 'scrapen holes' near the 'snowbound river', life can no longer be 'born young again'. Life is frozen in meaningless pain, which means the crumbling of culture. The harmony ancient myth and poetry set up between nature and culture is disrupted and the 'sleek fauns' or 'your gay goatish brute' are dismissed in this context in which reality is too harsh to admit any euphemisms.

The process is still clearer in 'Dead Cow Farm', in which the 'First Cow' can no longer lick the inanimate into being. No human life can blossom under her tongue any longer. Language can no longer give shape to the elements and therefore: 'Here is chaos once again, // Primaeval mud, cold stone and rain.' The images of depression take precedence and all notion of ideal and heroism is ruled out. Graves uses the word 'hero' to describe a boy he had met at school:

A boy at Penrallt called Ronny was the greatest hero I had ever met. He had a house at the top of a pine-tree which nobody else could climb, and a huge knife, made from the tip of a scythe which he had stolen; and he killed pigeons with a catapult, cooked them, and ate them in the tree-house. (*Goodbye*, 22)

The images of power (climbing, height and the knife) combine with perfect independence from civilisation in the world of nature. Such a mythic childhood ideal, which we can find in a more elaborate form in 'Rocky Acres', was obviously shaken by the overwhelming reality of the trenches. Such is the 'hero's death' in 'The Leveller':

Yet in his death this cut-throat wild
 Groaned 'Mother ! Mother !' like a child,
 While that poor innocent in man's clothes
 Died cursing God with brutal oaths.

The perfection of religion can be questioned while the scapegoat's world has opened and, although Graves claimed war was the sacrifice of the younger generation, he nevertheless felt guilty of the murder.

To be a 'strong moralist' means to have a split personality, the observer and the actor. The disgust and fascination the war provoked in Graves certainly widened this inner duality. A memory of the war, in *Goodbye to All That*, opens the series of four 'caricature scenes' in which Graves describes himself ironically:

This is one of the caricature scenes that now seem to sum up the various stages of my life. Myself in faultless khaki with highly polished buttons and belt, revolver at hip, whistle on cord, delicate moustache on upper lip, and stern endeavour a-glint in the eye, pretending to be a Regular Army captain; but crushed into that inky desk-bench like an overgrown schoolboy. (*Goodbye*, 150)

The next one, on page 223, provides a snapshot of his marriage with Nancy Nicholson in January 1918. The third one shows him in the grocer's shop in Oxford and the fourth deals with his political association with the Labour Party. In all those, action in society seems to be ridiculed and ironically denied to Graves the actor by Graves the observer. The war has apparently cast a veil of unreality on ordinary life. When Graves went home on leave in September 1915, he wrote: 'London seemed unreal itself' (*Goodbye*, 120).

Although gruesome, life in the trenches was struck with intensity, more akin to poetry than peace: 'Peace brought a slump in the sale of poetry' (*Goodbye*, 258). War not only disrupted all moral standards, as Freud clearly expressed in his essay on the Great War. It also altered the notions of space and time, recreated on the Front as to differ widely from ordinary reality. In *Bellone ou la pente de la guerre*, Roger Caillois likens wars to agrarian festivals, showing how both types of events create some sort of sacred space and time, intense and divorced from the routine of everyday life. To a certain extent, this is what Graves wished when he hoped the war would last long enough to delay his going to Oxford in October. Caillois shows how these festivals are linked with adolescent initiation, with a return to chaos and to such kind of monstrous fecundity that produces everything, good or

evil, life being regenerated in the process of death and rebirth. Graves found reasons to be fascinated by the war and the last glimpses of honour it produced (see 'Christmas Truce' in *Collected Short Stories*) but was also plagued with a sense of chaos and with neurasthenia. Yet, paradoxically, he felt even more ill-at-ease away from the trenches, in the very different world of everyday life.

Therefore, if truth was to be found, some new persona was to be created with some regenerated vision of space, time and dedication. The strong moralist could no longer believe in what moral standards presented as true and the seeker of high ideals could no longer be contented with mere routine. He had to face the intensity of experience and so to turn the 'shout' into the 'web' of language. Both the short story 'The Shout', written in 1924, of which Martin Seymour-Smith says it was probably 'the fullest representation of his haunted state that he achieved in those years' and the poem 'The Cool Web', published in 1927, express the observer's amazement at the power of experience and the intensity of feelings it conveys. In 'The Shout', the personality is split between everyday life and such intensity as can kill. Since it is the task of poetry to convert the shout into words, it should 'spell away the soldiers and the fright' through reviving the truth of experience instead of veiling it. In his essay entitled 'The Choice of the Three Caskets', Freud showed that the transformation of the Goddess of Death into a Goddess of Love was a way of overcoming the unpleasant awareness of death, and this euphemistic shift marked a striking triumph of desire. Yet Graves does not want only to sweeten the notion of death; he wants to retrieve some sort of equilibrium without forsaking the truth, namely the tragic crudity of experience. The intensity poetry requires is as amazing as that of experience, as Martin Seymour-Smith writes:

The fundamental thesis of the story, though it does not mention poetry, is that the practice of poetry (magic) turns a man into a monster, and his hitherto 'ordinary' beloved into a tyrannous, capricious, cruel and sinister being. (117)

Both Graves's high moral standards as acquired through education and the overwhelming experience of war led him to create a world of his own, in which he could redefine space and time in order to find some sort of balance between intensity and peace. This could only be achieved in sacred space and cyclic time.

III. THE WHITE GODDESS: A GAME WITH FATE

In his book *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga refers to the origins of poetry as a play activity, showing how it is situated in a universe created by the mind in which things appear differently than in ordinary life and are connected to something else than logic. He stresses the link of poetry with religious festivals and games in which riddles have to be solved. *The White Goddess* appears as an intellectual game with the solving of a number of riddles throughout the maze of its structure. In *Art and Artist*, Otto Rank takes the Egyptian Serpent's game as a typical example of a game, showing how this maze, symbolising the entrails and mortality, comes to symbolise the idea of resurrection as it is represented by the sun's cyclic journey. Rank stresses how games are related to the cyclic year and the religious festivals celebrating the death and resurrection of agrarian divinities. Games are closely connected with fate, with a will to relieve the psyche from anxiety.

Therefore it is no surprise that *The White Goddess*, dealing with such an intense and tragic subject as poetic initiation, should take the appearance both of a game and of a maze. We should here recall that in his *Seven Days in New Crete*, Graves replaced wars with games played on special festival days. In *The White Goddess*, Graves's method is neither academic nor linear. It is personal and poetic. The first chapter starts with the poet's assertion of his dedication to poetry. 'I' recurs throughout the book contributing to build the persona of the poet through references to the poet's experience itself and to the myth of Gwion; it is also related to the God of poetry, Apollo. The sacred space of trees and birds is sometimes connected with childhood memories and the 'rediscovery of the lost rudiments' stems from the experience of the intensity of fate:

... if they still have validity they confirm the intuition of 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.' (*White*, 21)

The riddles Graves enumerates in his Foreword seem to be part of a game and look anachronistic except for the fifth one: 'Where shall wisdom be found?' Therefore *The White Goddess* is a quest, both a quest for the poet's identity and for the nature of poetry. Both the poet and poetry have to be genuine and truth is being pursued through myth. The roebuck is literally chased through the pages. The pursuer acquires more and more freedom throughout, dismissing academic

objections with ironic flippancy and placing himself on an equal footing with ancient writers such as Pindar (on page 289) or Herodotus (on page 140). Therefore time is no longer 'snowbound' and space is open to unlimited creation through the pursuit of truth. In analeptic and proleptic movement, the mind is being set free.

Yet pursuit and riddles are part of an initiation and therefore the principle of initiation defines the structure of the book. Graves's method is mainly analogical and extensive. Mythological facts and figures are tied together through the quest, which sometimes baffles the reader. Yet the maze-like aspect of the work goes deeper. In its structure, *The White Goddess* fits its purpose: twenty-six (that is twice thirteen, the Goddess's figure) chapters leading to 'The Return of the Goddess'. At the entrance of the maze we find the poet himself, but also the poet as persona through the reference to Alun Lewis and the Theme. From his own experience, knowledge and intuition, as well as from the testimony of his fellow poets of all periods, Graves seeks to deduce the archetypes of poetry and the poet's persona.

In the following chapters, the poetic quest is seen as the stake of a battle (Chapter 2); its aim is the discovery of a well-kept secret (Chapter 3). Graves's insistence on conflict and on the mystery of truth should not surprise us. Moreover the search is a game whose first hero is a child who will find his adult's identity only through poetry. The Goddess herself appears only in Chapter 4, four being the figure of cosmic equilibrium, of the cosmic whole (four cardinal points and four seasons). Four suggests plenitude of space and time. Moreover, in Graves's own calendar, the sun grows to maturity in the fourth month, that of the alder, a symbol of resurrection, immediately followed by the willow, for the poet's eloquence. Therefore the mind here opens to the mystery of Gwion's riddle (Chapter 5). The identity between the poet and the Goddess is suggested throughout the quest: five is the figure sacred to the Goddess. It also symbolises the son's life from birth to death. The son's identity is at stake in Chapter 6, "A Visit to Spiral Castle". Here we find the emblem of the maze connected with death and resurrection, which mean here initiation. In *La Nostalgie des origines*, Mircea Eliade confirms that most adolescent initiations consist of symbolical death and resurrection. Graves sees the Castle of Arianrhod as the place in which heroes and poets await resurrection. This privilege 'to be reborn' seems to be part of early initiation since the hero is vouchsafed identity by his mother, 'a name and a set of arms': 'Llew Llaw has no father at all, in the Romance, and must

remain anonymous until his mother is tricked into making a man of him' (*White*, 100). In this same chapter, the poet is compared to an unsatisfied child always asking difficult questions. If we compare this chapter to Jesus's initiation in *King Jesus*, we find that the resurrection in the Castle of Arianrhod can be likened to the passage from childhood into adolescence Graves describes in Chapter 15 of *King Jesus*. When the Doctors in the Temple come to doubt the young Jesus's origins and call him 'bastard', he reacts in the following way: 'But Jesus had toppled and fallen to the ground with his limbs rigid and his features distorted with pain. A terrible cry rang through the building' (*Jesus*, 200). Here we find familiar Gravesian themes: the loss of balance, the fall and the shout. The shout seems to be the bodily reaction to the loss of identity, to the perplexity of the self as faced with nothingness. There might also be here an oblique, probably unconscious, reference to the war situation, the young Graves having then been confronted with a loss of identity as a young hero facing only death, decay and the iniquity of the task. Jesus's loss is repaired by his mother. His question is: 'Who am I, then, Mother?' Bestowing identity upon him, Mary gives him his second birth, or resurrection:

As Mary told Jesus the story of his birth, he felt the lost powers of his mind flooding back, with nothing lost or impaired; on the contrary, he knew himself capable of thought hitherto beyond his scope. (*Jesus*, 203)

The Castle of Arianrhod (Arianrhod being associated with birth and initiation in Chapter 18, which bears out this analysis) is the place of the early disclosure of identity through the Mother-Goddess's words. Graves himself admits what he owes to his mother in *Goodbye to All That*:

These quotations make it clear how much I owe, as a writer, to my mother. She also taught me to 'speak the truth and shame the devil!' Her favourite Biblical exhortation went: 'My son, whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might.' (*Goodbye*, 33)

In those words, Graves's dedication as a poet is contained: the search for truth with all his might in a world of Biblical references. Yet, this truth has to be self-defined after the collapse of values, ideals and personal equilibrium due to the war. Chapter Six should also be connected with 'The Second-Fated', the symbolical account of Graves's death and resurrection in 1916, at a period when he saw himself as an 'overgrown schoolboy'. Intense experience, or pain, whether it be induced by the war or by love, entails the same reaction with Graves, the feel-

ing that his sensibility being keener, his knowledge and the capacities of his mind are being intensified. He finds new strength in his acceptance of cyclic time, of 'a moon-warmed world of discontinuance', in the same way as the discarded lover finds new identity in loss ('Lost Love'):

This man is quickened so with grief,
He wanders god-like or like thief
Inside and out, below, above,
Without relief seeking lost love.

In *Soleil noir*, her study of depression and melancholy, Julia Kristeva shows how the birth of language is linked with the loss of the mother. *The White Goddess* tends to demonstrate how the real theme of poetry is absence: 'her nakedly worn magnificence'.

It comes as no surprise that, after such revelation of identity, Gwion's riddle should be solved (Chapter 7), seven being a figure of achievement and triumph. Here the letters, which spell out the secret are given. In Chapter 8, a figure of increase and fruitfulness, we find a summary of the historical argument. In Chapter 9, ironically entitled 'Gwion's Heresy' since nine is one of the Goddess's figures in all her aspects, encompassing both time and space and therefore the whole of reality, the identity of the Goddess as the first living principle is being reasserted. She is the Holy Spirit; she is the 'anima'. The 'heresy' is recalled in Chapter 12, the figure of established power, as well as in Chapter 13, both the figure of the lunar year of thirteen months and that of decline and death. The gift of the sacred alphabet stands out on the background of loss and absence again. The hero's reaction to his own fear when confronted with the face of fate, or Medusa's head, severs male mankind into two groups, the destroyer, here Perseus, who becomes Pterseus in the final chapter, and the poet. The destroyer kills Medusa while the poet gets the secret alphabet from her as well as poetic sight. What is at stake is man's attitude as regards his own suffering through his rejection or his acceptance of fate in all its aspects. In this chapter, putting things right, Graves transforms Perseus into 'Mercury, or Hermes, or Car, or Palamedes, or Thoth, or whatever his original name was' (*White*, 230). The duality of the soldier/poet is transcended by the Protean character of the poet-hero and immediately after, in Chapter 14 (a favourable figure, that of the fourteen days leading to the full moon's plenitude), the mystery is dis-

closed and the pursued roebuck is finally found when the Goddess is at the apex of her power. The identity of the roebuck and the Goddess is established. The roebuck is associated with questions on loss or absence, referring both to love and war: 'Where is my love gone? Where are my lost companions?' (*White*, 251). The desire for immortality can only be captured and partly fulfilled, through poetry:

The Unicorn is the Roe in the Thicket. It lodges under an apple-tree, the tree of immortality-through-wisdom. It can be captured only by a pure virginæWisdom herself. The purity of the virgin stands for spiritual integrity. (*White*, 255)

Poetry, or the Goddess, is immortality: the intensity of experience gets reconciled with poetic achievement: 'The comment means that love of the Goddess makes the poet mad: he goes to his death and in death is made wise' (*White*, 253).

Poetry yokes together the intensity of desire and the horrifying chasm of absence, bringing relief without relieving the pain. Poetry is no euphemism although it both soothes and intensifies experience at the same time. Graves had already grown aware of this during the war, which he reports in *Goodbye to All That* when referring to Siegfried Sassoon: 'Siegfried had not yet been in the trenches. I told him, in my old soldier manner, that he would soon change his style' (146). True poetry is no 'cool web' but the poetry of 'unrest'.

The sacred aspect of the seven trees is emphasised in the next chapter, 15, under the title 'The Seven Pillars'. Again the identity of the Goddess, with 15 being the full moon's figure, and that of the poet's desire, or roebuck (with the figure 7), is brought out. Plenitude is found not only in space but also in time:

So the poetic answer to Job's poetic question: 'Where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of understanding?' which his respect for Jehovah the All-wise prevented him from facing is: 'Under an apple-tree, by pure meditation, on a Friday evening, in the season of apples, when the moon is full.' But the finder will be Wednesday's child. (*White*, 260)

Wisdom is immortality through the power of the mind, through absolute poetic plenitude. Moreover, poetry seems to be here a denial of sacrifice, since Christ's crucifixion occurred on a Friday evening, but in the spring.

The Protean character of the poet-hero is stressed in Chapter 16, while the poet is contrasted with the warrior. In Chapter 17, the duality of the hero's character is set in cyclic time, the sun being born and

dying only to be reborn. The hero's metamorphoses are in keeping with the Goddess's several aspects: birth, initiation, love, wisdom and death, as exposed in Chapter 18, in which the poet-hero suffers mutilation through Graves's reference to the *cothurnus* and to the origins of tragedy. Sacrifice is inserted in cyclic time. A part of experience partakes of castration. Poetry is the account of this tragedy.

Chapter 19 is a blank space in the maze, in which Graves refers to the Apocalypse, which gives Chapter 26, 'The Return of the Goddess', the appearance of a Second Coming. The link with ancient times and Graves's ease both in space and time come across in Chapter 20, in which the poet overhears a conversation at Paphos in A.D. 43, finding that chastity is only one face of a dual reality and hides the original eroticism. Moreover, the identity of desire and of the object of desire (the goddess) crops up through the possible misinterpretation of the Palladium, of which Graves says it is a 'phallic statue, rather than that of the Goddess' (*White*, 356). Georges Devereux, in his essay on the birth of Aphrodite, demonstrated that, as the fertile Goddess, as a creative power, is the metamorphosis in the sea foam of Uranus's penis, it is a phallic woman and can sometimes even be the phallus itself. The identity of the poet and the Goddess comes out more clearly still: she is desire for love, immortality and plenitude. She is as ambivalent as 'The Waters of the Styx' (Chapter 21), being both life and death, fruitfulness and castration, but experience finds its rhythm and balance in cyclic time. The Styx is one of the meanders of the primeval ocean, at the edge of chaos. With the Goddess, we find ourselves at the limits of such worlds as life and death, nature and culture, culture being constantly fed by the intensity of chaos, or the power of the unconscious. A descent into hell, near the waters of the Styx, is a descent into the self and then the Goddess is called 'Deliveress from guilt' (*White*, 376). The phallic aspect of the Goddess, the fact that she is a projection of the poet's desire, does not make her easy to conquer: she also symbolises the untameable side of experience: 'She is impartial: she destroys or creates with equal passion' (*White*, 388). She is hope restored in a self-defined ideal without denial of fate. She combines what Freud called the principle of pleasure and that of reality. Her cruelty, to a certain extent, guarantees the genuine character of poetry, which is dual but balanced in cyclic time, hope and life in equilibrium with frustration and death. The twins, or rivals, of Chapter 22, the Star-son and the Serpent, become the lyrical poet and the Satirist in Chapter 25. In this way, the duality of the poet's personality is

bridged: 'He is himself and his other self at the same time, king and supplanter, victim and murderer, poet and satirist - and his right hand does not know what his left hand does' (*White*, 446).

In the same way as the poet has to be critical of his own work and even 'clear the soil for a new sowing', the Goddess is otherness incarnate: 'The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual "other woman"' (*White*, 449). In the concluding chapters of the book, the cyclic dialectics of the drama of experience is being emphasised (Chapter 23). The cruelty of experience is balanced by the poet's hope and physical desire should not be ruled out: 'since poetry is rooted in love, and love in desire, and desire in hope of continued existence' (*White*, 409). The Beast of the Apocalypse turns into several calendar beasts such as the Sphinx or the Chimaera, which become images of fear and desire intricately intertwined. Cyclic time breaks with the duality of good and evil: the Goddess is ambivalent. Graves makes it clear in Chapter 24 (this figure can be seen as a reassertion of sovereignty, as twice twelve):

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. (*White*, 434)

The return of this ambivalent character, whose 'service is perfect freedom' is preceded by 'War in Heaven' in Chapter 25, which recalls the Apocalypse and Graves's acknowledgement that conflicts are fruitful if transcended with love. 25 can be considered an assertion of the Goddess (5 X 5) and of the poet-hero's Passion. This war is poetic since it opposes Classicism and Romanticism. The poet must control the destroyer or satirist in himself and dedicate himself to the main theme, 'the relations of man and woman': the theme of poetry is otherness, both fulfilment and loss. Poetry takes its roots in primitive magic and sheer violence. It is a result of an initiation and of absolute dedication. Graves's mother's counsel comes back to mind when we read this sentence:

The true poet must always be original, but in a simpler sense: he must address only the Museænot the King or Chief Bard or the people in generalæand tell the *truth* about himself and her in his own *passionate* and peculiar words. (*White*, 444)

Finally, in Chapter 26, Pterseus the Destroyer becomes a symbol of our industrial world, doomed to disappear if it keeps holding its dual-

istic, antagonistic tenet. The book closes with satire, destroying destruction to 'clear the soil for a new sowing.' It is no surprise that that metaphor used on page 446 should refer to the agrarian cycle.

The shift from linear to cyclic time implies that mythic time or the everlasting return is favoured rather than historical or messianic time. In *Seven Days in New Crete*, Graves expresses his fear of historical time as it is accelerated by industrialism, thus recalling the Symbolists' attitude: 'It's the mechanisation of life that makes our age what it is: science and money combine to turn the wheels round faster and faster' (*Seven Days*, 9). Yet religion, through its messianic conception of time is also responsible for such exhaustion of hope: 'One of the reasons for the restlessness of Christendom has always been that the Gospel postulates an immediate end of time and therefore denies mankind a sense of spiritual security' (*White*, 481).

Cyclic time provides spiritual security since, as Mircea Eliade points out, time is renewed ever and again. The old year dies and the new one is born. Time is being regenerated along with moral values and identities. The New Year repeats the everlasting return of the origins, the passage of chaos to cosmos. It refers to the sacred time of the world's creation. Eliade confirms that the ritual festivals tend to define a sacred space as well as a sacred time and writes, in *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour*, that 'all that is being founded is being founded at the centre of the world' (Eliade, *Mythe*, 31).

Graves intends to give poetry the strength of the sacred in trying to trace it back to its origins. Only the power of the sacred can respond to the emotional weight of experience. Poetry has to be sacred to be intense enough to rise above the 'cool web of language'. In Chapter 15, appropriately called 'The Seven Pillars', sacred space and time are being defined in the answer to 'Job's poetic question'. The seven trees are transformed into seven pillars so as to evoke the Temple and define a centre in which desire, fate and poetry find their place in sheer intensity.

Now the sacred space provides a guarantee of identity since it associates both microcosm and macrocosm in a play of correspondences built up throughout the book: the universe, the earth, trees, birds, all sorts of animals, associate with man. Language pervades the whole of reality. The sacred letters are associated with trees, birds, the fingers, precious stones and the planets. Moreover poetry is connected with bodily activity, namely dancing. Otto Rank recalls Ernst Böcklen's theory as expressed in *Die Entstehung der Sprache im Lichte des Mythos*,

showing that language found its origins in lunar myths, and concludes that the moon is the symbol of man's wish for immortality, a wish he endeavours to satisfy through language. The myths of the phases of the moon help to restore hope as no death is final since it is followed by rebirth. Yet such immortality is no unending bliss but unceasing movement through decline, death, and rebirth. In this case, permanence, Gilbert Durand writes, is perpetual change and repetition of the various phases. Through the myths of the moon, fate as blind fatality and terror, as symbolised by such visions of anxiety as darkness, the swarming of insects or the figure of the maze, is abolished and the variety of existence is given meaning through partial acceptance of change. Therefore man's identity is being restored while the drama of human life is given images, is made visible. Gilbert Durand bears out Graves's views:

Dans toute l'ère méditerranéo-mésopotamienne, la mise en rapport des souffrances de l'homme et de la divinité se fera par image lunaire interposée. [*In the whole Mediterranean area and Mesopotamia, man's suffering and that of the divinity were connected through lunar images*] (Durand, 339)

Man's life and death are associated with the vegetable cycles in the passion and resurrection of the Sun, who plays the role of an intermediate between separate worlds, the human and the divine, whether he be Osiris, Jesus, or Hermes Trismegistus, the symbol of all the phases of existence. Cyclic time helps to give a positive outlook to the drama of existence since what is negative is necessary to the achievement of positive plenitude. Graves's quest is existential. The opposites are reconciled and duality is replaced by a dialectical alternation of good and evil, of fruitfulness and decay, of life and death. Nothing is ever final. Spiritual security is achieved.

This notion of spiritual security is also made clear in an essay Graves wrote later in *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* (1973):

Those middle-Eastern Paradises, so far back as the Sumerians, are reported as delightful mountain-top gardens watered by a four-headed crystal river, their fruit-trees laden with flashing jewels; and a wise serpent always haunts them. Rare humans who enter Paradise while in a state of grace are granted 'perfect wisdom' by the Serpent—'knowledge of good and evil' means knowledge of 'all things that exist'—and only the herb of immortality is denied them. ('The Universal Paradise', 79)

Spiritual security is achieved through an acceptance of destiny whose

symbol is the serpent, as transformation in time, fecundity, and ancestral continuity. Both the serpent and the moon are fate contemplated through the mind's eye, that is both realistically admitted and hopefully interpreted, fate humanised.

The identity between macrocosm and microcosm helps to create a heroic image of the self. The individual is no longer left alone with no moral or existential pattern to follow. He is no longer faced with vacuity since he is able to dramatise his own fate and to build his own image of the self. Graves shifts from *Imitatio Christi* to a projection of the soul's existential drama dialectically set up in sacred space, time, and language. In this as well as on some other points he agrees with Rank, who says that art gives man the courage to come to terms with his own soul. Art gives the soul its shape. This is exactly what Graves does in *The White Goddess*, giving the poet's soul a shape in the variety of experience, duality being transcended through the infinity of the hero's metamorphoses. The poet's persona is being created in the moon's image, ever changeable.

This initiation, through which the cruelty of experience is being redeemed, is strewn with several symbols that give an idea of the soul's journey from polemical duality to the dialectical reconciliation of opposites. It starts with the image of a definite maze, that of New Grange in Ireland. The description Graves gives in Chapter 6 confirms the symbolical import of the figure: 'The shaft consists of a narrow passage, sixty feet long, through which one has to crawl on hands and knees' (*White*, 102). The maze is generally interpreted as the penetration of a centre, as a way of getting rid of fear and of the feelings of sexual guilt. Graves was perfectly aware of the symbol: 'In spiral Castle (passage-burial), the entrance to the inner chamber is always narrow and low in representation of the entrance to the womb' (*White*, 213). Gilbert Durand associates this image of the womb with the symbols provided by food, milk, or apples. The process discloses that what has been repressed is better accepted. Such elements or notions as water, the night, hollow shapes and femininity are given new value. The tomb becomes a womb and all kinds of vessels are liable to give rebirth and recreate Paradise, whether a vase, an ark, or a boat. On the Etruscan vases Graves mentions the redeeming letters of poetry are written and what the 'liknos' contains is ambivalent. It is associated with harvest and therefore with food and can be Dionysis' cradle in Eleusis but also the vessel of the passage from death to life at the winter solstice. It contains the phallus, or the symbol of creative sexual

power.

Through the descent into the maze, into the womb, or into the self, identity and creative power get regenerated. Graves turns the fish, which 'like the nuns, is proverbial for his sexual indifference' (*White*, 349) into a porpoise, the symbol of erotic religion, in Chapter 20. Through a series of analogies, the 'sea-beast' is linked with Hermes and the serpent: 'And Hermesæhe's the prime phallic god, and also the god of eloquence, and his erotic statues are usually carved from an oak' (*White*, 355).

The identity of the poet and of the Goddess is obvious: 'Venus the thumb (as a phallic emblem)' (*White*, 197). Therefore the labyrinth of riddles turns into a spiral. We read such sentences as: 'We can begin our secondary process of unravelling Gwion's riddles' (*White*, 117). Or: 'The same myth has been twisted in a variety of ways' (*White*, 129). So the book takes the shape of the initiation: a Visit to Spiral Castle. The labyrinth in the centre becomes a spiral so that death is negated and turned into life again:

Vine and ivy come next to each other at the turn of the year, and are jointly dedicated to resurrection, presumably because they are the only trees in the Beth-Luis-Nion that grow spirally. (*White*, 183)

Poetry, taken as a sacred language, can face the cruelty of experience and give it a shape. The goddess is the shape and combines all aspects of desire and fear, the sacred ambivalence of birth, love, and death. Nothing is sweetened. Her cruelty is contained in her magnificence. The poet finds his own plenitude in this unrest since poetry is wisdom. The hill of poetry is 'rooted in the death letters R and I and surmounted by the C of wisdom' (*White*, 212).

The poet is like the titmouse that 'spirals to immortality' (*White*, 299). His full poetic power is retrieved through this definition of the sacred, or existential task, of poetry. The fall is redeemed through this winding upward. This excerpt of the essay 'Genius' in *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* suggests how Graves managed to regenerate and certainly to create his own moral values through his mythic research: 'But *genius* had a spiritual rather than a physical sense and implied the creative power with which a man is born and which accompanies him throughout his life as his highest spiritual self, his protector, his oracle. A Roman who behaved evilly or foolishly was said to have 'defrauded his genius'. Genius was his primitive male dignity, his sense of love, and his power of instinctive thought, the preservation of which was his constant duty' ('Genius', 7).

The poet is no longer overwhelmed with duality or with his split personality: creative desire, which is itself highly desired as such, encompasses both spiritual and physical desire reconciled. Creativity is dignity and moral achievement. *The White Goddess* is poetry raised to the rank of a philosophy of life. Poetry is being. It provides life with a dignified shape. To this extent, it is religious: words are divine and death is redeemed through images. Rather than an escape from experience, Graves's mythic research could be seen as a response to the turmoil of the modern world, in which the individual is faced with isolation and fragmentation and the poet with a lack of definition, a doubtful persona and an uncertain task:

He thought of Rachel and tears started to his eyes. Then he sang to comfort himself. 'Oh, I'm certainly mad,' he said, 'and what in the world has happened to my luck?'

At last he came to the stones. 'Now,' he said, 'I shall find my soul in this heap and I shall crack it into a hundred pieces with this hammer'—he had picked up the hammer in the coal shed as he came out.

Then he began looking for his soul. Now, one may recognise the soul of another man or woman, but one can never recognise one's own. Richard could not find his. (26)

Now, although Graves's theme and quest are obviously tragic, we should not forget the pleasure of the game as exemplified in the bird calendar of Chapter 16. We may derive intense poetic satisfaction from this series of solved riddles reported 'in imitation of the style used in the *Book of Ballymote* itself.' Each question is answered 'with a boy's presumption' by the defiant words, 'Not hard.' The enumeration of birds and colours throughout the life of the year refers us back to the peace of country life, peace of mind, and 'peace of body', as D.H. Lawrence wrote in *Women in Love* as Gerald and Rupert are talking about war. Even if the year's death is blood-red, there remains comfort in the cycle of seasons: 'And Blue is the haze on the hills, Blue the smoke of the burning weed, Blue the skies before the November rain' (*White*, 299).

Even if poetry is dedicated to truth with all the poet's might, it is nevertheless the triumph of desire.

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