

REVIEWS

The White Goddess: Fifty Years After

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On September 3rd-5th, 1998, Graves scholars and admirers from around the world gathered at the University of Manchester's Hulme Hall Conference Center, to hear over 30 presentations assessing Graves' most enigmatic book and its influence in the half-century since its publication. The White Goddess Conference was organized by Patrick Villa, Patrick Quinn, and Ian Firla and was generously sponsored by the Robert Graves Society, Carcanet Press, St. John's College, Oxford, the University of Manchester, and Burlington Resources.

One strong theme of the conference was a concern with the genesis and creation of *The White Goddess*. Frank Kersnowski found the sources of the early poems also active in the development of the idea of the Goddess, maintaining that "... the White Goddess would scarcely have more power than Nancy Nicholson or the homicidal succubi he [Graves] imagined as a paradoxical escape." Kersnowski says that, in Graves' attempt to treat his neurasthenia and neuroses, "... the demons he found in the subconscious coalesced into the White Goddess." Richard Perceval Graves, similarly, traced the roots of the Goddess to Graves' and Riding's "*folie a deux*," and outlined the stages of the book's production. Robert Bertholf provided even greater detail about the composition of *The White Goddess*, working from the Buffalo manuscript, which he described as "... one of the most complex of modern manuscripts, along with Joyce's *Ulysses*."

The manuscript in Buffalo raises almost as many questions as it answers: 262 pages of typescript, with pasted-in additions in typeset and in longhand, it has its own beginnings in five different and separate typescripts which were edited/joined into one final version. These beginnings included a manuscript that "... started with the Taliesin thing and ended up all over the place," the Wales piece, and the "Essene-Ebionite thing." Graves "got the Jesus book back in proofs," while adding the final 15,000 words to *The White Goddess*—in galley proofs. (In counter to Bertholf's analysis of the manuscripts, Grevel Lindrop, himself a poet and editor of the Carcanet edition of *The White Goddess*, delivered a fascinating late evening talk on the publishing history of the first edition. Few will forget his analysis of Graves' own shocking account of the fates of publishers who said no to the Goddess—apparently Graves' accounts are true—if in fact

unattributable to the one true Muse.

Another common theme of the conference was the search for poetic precursors of the White Goddess. Patrick Quinn found precursors of the impulse for reconciliation that underlies the White Goddess in "The Feather Bed" and in the search for perfect love in "Between Dark and Dark", (Patrick began his search with the evocative suggestion that we might view *The White Goddess* as a nature myth.) Devindra Kohli, calling *The White Goddess* a metaphor of the necessary circumstances or "ingredients" for Graves' poetic creativity, made use of Graves' seldom-cited 1970 *Playboy* magazine interview, in which Graves said the White Goddess means the integration of the conscious and the unconscious, the twisting of time into a ring. In illustrating his case, Devindra also relied on "Sick Love" (the published version of "Between Dark and Dark"), and on "Lost Acres". In the latter poem, Devindra finds expression of Graves' fear that if he were cured of his "hauntings", he would become "merely an 'easy' writer".

Just as Devindra began his reading of precursors to the White Goddess with the inevitable concession to the long shadow of Laura Riding—"the necessity of submitting to judgement by a female mind" is a constant in the poetry—Dunstan Ward pointed out that "Theseus and Ariadne" grew from "To Die and Die," written just after the Riding-Graves estrangement. Other precursors, for Dunstan, include the hostility toward organized religion evident in "A Boy in Church" and "Face of the Heavens." Graves' many moon-poems are illustrative of his technique (and near-constant theme) of "reconciliation of opposites." Dunstan calls *The White Goddess* a religious book written to explicate a poetic religion and admires the way it allowed the "transposing" of "painful personal material into myth." He finds the manifesto and the resulting poems honest and demonstrative of integrity. Yet, Dunstan courageously argued, the figure of the White Goddess too easily conflates the individual muse with the Muse and the "resulting doublethink" is particularly problematic in the context of the many late poems dealing with sexual betrayal. This "slightly circular logic" led Graves to "a formula for poems," which unfortunately resulted in many "formula poems," Dunstan concluded.

A number of speakers at the conference maintained that *The White Goddess* is less central to Graves' work than is usually thought the case. Paul O' Prey argued that the Goddess poems continue Graves' soldier poems, in a sense: the Goddess poet is on a quest, attempting rigorous service, accepting the inevitability of death in a challenging

landscape, scornful of those who choose to remain behind. Similarly, Andrew Painter considered the White Goddess another Gravesian metaphor for the terror of the war, if an inverted metaphor: the poet *chooses* to submit, and therefore *controls*, the same intensity of torment and threats of death Graves had first experienced in the War. Painter referred to *The White Goddess* at one point as “only a poetic policy in prose” and pointed out that many of Graves’ poems after *The White Goddess* appeared to deal with subjects other than the Goddess. Indeed, argued John Smeds after an analysis of the diction of the Goddess poems, Graves wrote only “about five” poems actually formed by the historical grammar—the “metaphors for poetry”—he discovered in 1943. In fact, Smeds pointed out the poem “Sick Love,” which is as rich in Goddess metaphor and diction as any of Graves’ poems, was written well before *The White Goddess* appeared.

My own paper, perhaps strengthened by this “minimalist” thread of discussion, advanced the proposition that, despite Graves’ use of the Goddess myth in *King Jesus*, his “other obsession” throughout the forties and fifties was the historical Jesus. Francesca Ditifeci even proposed that *Goodbye to All That*—not *The White Goddess*—is “the universal key to all of Graves’ production,” with every theme he later explored in his poetry present in his early memoir.

Several Graves scholars “played Virgil to our Dante” by offering ways to first comprehend and read *The White Goddess*. Anne Mounic “linked the spirals,” showing a unified way to read the text as a manual for “escaping the corn mills of the heavens.” This last is Robert Davis’ phrase; his paper was also a convincing reading of the text: the muse promises, to those who endure, another mode of being and an escape from the necessary cycles of submission and death.

But, if no Reader’s Guide (a la William York Tindall) to *The White Goddess* arose from the conference, many papers explored the influence of the book, even on arts other than literature. Geoffrey Alvarez spoke on “The Significance of the White Goddess for Musical Thought,” and Thom Moore on personal experience entitled “The moon and the mountain: intimation, epiphany, or just plain foolishness?” Other papers included:

Fran Breaton, “Graves’ Influence on Seamus Heaney”

Ben Friedlander, “Olson’s White Goddess”

Ian Firla, “A Radical Tradition More Orthodox than Most”

Mary-Ann Constantine, “Scholars and Silences: Graves and the

Battle of the Trees"

Alice Hughes, "Edna O'Brien's *The High Road* and Graves' Goddess"

Michael Pharand, "Unusual Idiosyncrasy: The Making of the Greek Myths"

Ben Wright, "The Goddess' Instruction on Courtly Behaviour"

One session was devoted to feminism, women writers, and the White Goddess:

Rita Rippetoe, "Goddess Poetry in a New Light: Robert Graves to the Current Revival"

Asphodel Long, "Challenge or Inspiration? The White Goddess in Contemporary Feminism and Women's Studies"

Alison Goeller, "What Homer Never Told Us: Graves' Goddess in the Poetry of HD"

Julia Simon also presented a talk on her own relationship with Robert Graves as his last muse entitled, "From White to Black: The Poetic Transference of the Muses". Another session, featuring Joan Fiol and Juana-Maria Segui, was devoted to "The Majorcan Influence."

The conference featured poetry readings by David Constantine, Bernard O'Donoghue, Grevel Lindop and Andrew Painter, dinners (at the Conference Center and on Manchester's justifiably famous "curry mile") and many friendly discussions as Graves scholars picked up where we left off after the 1995 conferences. And if no Reader's Guide emerged, well, as Ian Firla wrote in his welcome to the participants, "... perhaps we would do well to remember that this is a book about creativity." The many perspectives offered at the conference certainly reflected that understanding.

In reporting on the 1995 conferences, I concluded with the hope that a regular schedule of Gravesian meetings would develop; and so it has. With three successful Robert Graves conferences, the Robert Graves Society has provided a real forum for Graves scholarship; already plans are being made for conferences in the year 2000 and in the year 2002. Bravo!