

The Archetype of the White Goddess in Robert Graves, Maja Herman Sekulić, and Ted Hughes

Tanja Cvetković

The White Goddess (1948), a controversial and complex book by Robert Graves, is based on the myth about the pagan divinity of matriarchal cultures and religions present in the ancient world. This book accompanied a significant concept in the poetic vision of Graves and has influenced many contemporary writers and thinkers. We could talk about the White Goddess as a mythological and archetypal symbol which could be singled out of the context of modern literary interpretations. The archetypal pattern makes a good association with the work of Northrop Frye, the well-known literary theoretician, and proponent of the ritual and mythological school of criticism. Frye's work, especially *Anatomy of Criticism*, has been an inspiration for Serbian authoress Maja Herman Sekulić, but Frye's archetypal interpretation of literature could be applied to Graves's modern poetry as well. Namely, the subject of this paper will be Graves's introductory poem in the book *The White Goddess* as reflected in Herman Sekulić's long poem *Lady of Vincha* (2017). Since the archetypal symbol of the White Goddess has been present in many literary works, we will make a brief turn to its pre-figured forms in the work of the British writer Ted Hughes who noticed in his book *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992)¹ the recurrence of various themes, motifs, a basic structural pattern which he called Shakespeare's 'myth'. The monumental work would not have been possible without Graves's *The White Goddess*.

Herman Sekulić was well acquainted with the work of Northrop Frye, while Graves was one of the writers (together with George

Orwell, Samuel Beckett, Giorgio Bassani, T. S. Eliot, etc.) whom Frye discussed and mentioned frequently in his works. Apart from successfully using archetypal symbols in her poetry, Herman Sekulić did an interview on 5 December 1979 with Frye. The interview was included into one of the thirty volumes of the collected works and essays on Frye.² In his oeuvre Frye discussed many authors whose ideas were related to the basic postulations of his criticism, including Graves. Though he admired *The White Goddess*, Frye focused on the irony of the myth for which he said was symptomatic of the human effort to ‘screw the inscrutable’.³ According to Frye, Graves does not belong to the group of writers of the traditional mythopoetic school, to which T. S. Eliot belonged, but to ‘the tradition of the writers who have turned mythical erudition into satire’ (p. lvi). Consequently, in Frye’s opinion, Graves’s contribution is not in creating a ‘systematic mythology’ but in depicting ‘mythical use of poetic language, where we invent our own myths and apply them to an indefinite number of human themes’ (lvi). In that sense, we can view the prefigured mythical symbols in Graves’s poetry, as well as in the poetry of Herman Sekulić, and Ted Hughes, the way Frye describes the achievement of some authors to the development of the mythopoetic school of criticism.

In her essay ‘Mit i struktura’ (‘Myth and Structure’) published in the journal *Polja*, Herman Sekulić points to the significance of Frye’s work for understanding all of literature and emphasizes his contribution to the field of archetypal criticism and the theory of myth. Frye’s concept of the structure of literature is based on the assumption of the authenticity of myth according to Herman Sekulić, who points to Frye’s conclusion that literature is reconstructed mythology. One can make such a claim only by reducing myth to archetypes. Though he thinks that there is no equation between mythology and literature, Frye concludes that in every imaginative work of art there are archetypal patterns which recur (such as the symbol or the metaphor of flood, paradise, hell, romance, etc.). In that sense, Herman Sekulić’s essay emphasizes

Frye's idea that mythology is the matrix of literature to which poetry returns over and over again because it finds there great themes based on the principles of analogy. The conceptual frame of Frye's criticism is myth and archetype derived from literature itself.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, in four essays, Frye defines the concept of the archetypal symbol. For Frye archetypes are 'communicable symbols',⁴ or typical and repeated images common to all men. The archetype as a symbol connects one work of art with another, one poem with another, and helps the integration of our literary experience into the whole. Literature becomes a way of communication and the archetype as a symbol has a communicable power with unlimited potential. When we understand the meaning of one symbol the use of that symbol becomes recognizable to a great number of people who easily comprehend specific communicable associations of symbols:

When we speak of 'symbolism' in ordinary life we usually think of such learned cultural archetypes as the cross or the crown, or of conventional associations, as of white with purity or green with jealousy. As an archetype, green may symbolize hope or vegetable nature or a go sign in traffic or Irish patriotism as easily as jealousy, but the word green as a verbal sign always refers to a certain color. Some archetypes are so deeply rooted in conventional association that they can hardly avoid suggesting that association, as the geometrical figure of the cross inevitably suggest the death of Christ. (p. 102)

Accordingly, in Frye's definition of the concept, archetypes are specific symbols which recur in similar forms in different cultures.

In Frye's view, in its archetypal phase the poem imitates nature as a cyclical process. The principle of recurrence in the rhythm of art derives from the repetitions in nature. Thus, the archetypal critic studies the poem as part of poetry and poetry as part of

human imitation of nature (p. 105). In that sense, Graves's White Goddess, who inspires the poet, reflects the whole life cycle from birth to death including rebirth as well. In addition, Graves thinks of poetry as 'religious invocation of the Muse',⁵ which reflects man's wish to live in harmony with nature and to respect the symbols of poetry and the Muse. However, in the modern world, the White Goddess is reduced to a second-class divinity, and the symbols of poetry are degraded, while the moon, as the symbol of the Mother Goddess, the Muse and poetry, is despised 'as a burned-out satellite of the Earth and woman reckoned as "auxiliary State personnel"' (p. 14). While introducing the female divinity, the Goddess, the queen, as the centre of his poetic universe, who persists in spite of the natural life cycle, Graves gives a response to the dominant patriarchal myths. As life itself, the Goddess included all female aspects: the virgin, the lover/mother, the hag. However, the modern world has changed the function of poetry and the approach to the female divinity. The modern world has become the world 'in which money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet' (p. 14). At the beginning of *The White Goddess*, the introductory poem later revised and anthologised as 'The White Goddess', indicates clearly that the moon and the White Goddess should be admired as humanity's dedication to divinity and the female principle.

Herman Sekulić uses language comparable to Graves in describing the Lady of Vinča as 'the very first poet, proto poet, proto artist',⁶ the Moon-goddess, whom the inhabitants of the Vinča culture celebrated 5700-4500 BC. Lady of Vinča is the famous Neolithic figurine with triangular or pentagonal face, the protruding angular cheekbones, dreamy half-closed eyes, usually with her arms bended over her heart. She was the symbol of the rule of the female principle in Europe, but also the symbol of the first alphabet and messages inscribed in the Vinča script, the first proto letters still unknown to science. The mysterious magic signs of the proto Vinča letters were mystic and puzzling like the

figurine itself. Herman Sekulić has given this figurine a name after the ancient Greek word *maia* – mother, the mother of Hermes, meaning proto mother. She explains that she is ‘the White Goddess, wife, sister and mother of us all that spells with the hawthorn branch’ (p. 6). Hawthorn, or the May-tree, is the tree of purity and purification and the Romans never married in May named after it, further explains Herman Sekulić in the ‘Prologue’ of her long poem. This goddess had her nine muses who abided by the river Helicon (in Greek *helyce* – meaning willow, another tree mentioned in the poem).

Graves considers the White Goddess as ‘immortal, changeless, and omnipotent’, whom ‘men feared, adored, and obeyed’.⁷ She was the Moon-goddess and represented the three phases in the maturity of woman: youth, the maturity, old age. Herman Sekulić uses the same motif in her poem and describes the Goddess:

The Goddess of Moon, he loved her
Lips, her small feet, he kissed,
He sculpted her in clay, in stone,
With those big eyes, masked,
Omniscient, omnipresent –
'Not of this world', in awe he prayed. (p. 21)

Accordingly, she represented another trinity: the girl (air), the nymph (earth), the old woman (the underworld), and analogously the three Greek divinities: Selene, Aphrodite, and Hecate. However, as the yearly cycle of the sun rehearsed the ascent and decline of natural power, spring of the girl, summer of the nymph and winter of the old woman, the Great Goddess symbolized the changes in the vegetative and natural world. Herman Sekulić called this divinity Lady of Vincha, and the goddess Maya:

She was his, mine – Maya, our Proto Mother,
Lady of Vincha, of Divostima, of Danube,

Bent arm over her heart, in prayer, in spite,
Painted black and red to stand out among equals,
The mistress blessed of a Thousand-Year Empire,
From Mura to the south of Vardar river,
Peaceful and fair as in fairy tale. (p. 21)

Herman Sekulić connects the nine priestesses, or the nine Muses, who are inevitably part of Graves's oeuvre, with the archetype of the White Goddess.

You invoke your white-faced Muses, sisters,
Priestesses,
To dance, to pray for miners in the orgiastic
Trance
When they come from Earth to lay tired in your
Embrace
Bringing you shells and crystals, malachite and
Cinnabar,
Over seven hills and seven seas, from the end of
The world,
To renew their masculine strength in your lap. (p. 17)

She reminds readers of the special power and strength of the White Goddess as woman and mother, in the time which renounces and degrades the female principle (Frye's tragic mode in the archetypal criticism) which she opposes to the divine principle of birth and love embodied by the Great Goddess:

I will give birth again when hawthorn trees
Bloom
In spring, the cruel time.
Womb is life
Womb is tomb
I am the mistress of both
Not knowing it. (p. 36)

The White Goddess is the fertility goddess and the goddess of life who rules the underworld, known variously as Hecate or Persephone. She embodies life as wholeness, in all of its aspects: the life cycle of the vegetative and animal world. It is exactly these attributes of the goddess that Herman Sekulić glorifies.

Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being glorifies female divinity as the embodiment of the wholeness of life and applies the thesis to some of the most popular Shakespeare's plays. Hughes's study is based on two myths which Shakespeare incorporated in his long poem, 'Venus and Adonis', and in the poem 'The Rape of Lucrece'. Hughes's understanding of poetry is linked to the mythical story of the White Goddess. Though he called Graves's *The White Goddess*, 'the chief holy book of my poetic conscience',⁸ he creates his own vision of the rule and fall of the supreme female divinity, which underwrites his explication. Hughes sees the crucial conflict in Shakespeare's plays between the natural order symbolized by the Venus myth and the Puritan sensibility represented by the myth of Lucrece. In Shakespeare's drama the conflict between the two mythological tendencies were combined into 'the composite myth of the English Reformation itself'.⁹ Hughes further explains that Shakespeare's conflict between natural religion and the Puritan sensibility is susceptible to two interpretations. Transposed into another symbolic level, the conflict is between nature, including humanity's own nature, the natural world, and the world of technological progress and human achievements. Hughes explains the conflict between two myths in terms of 'tragic equation'.

Shakespeare's formula of 'the tragic equation' is based on the spirit of the period in which he lived. Shakespeare had actually unearthed the psychological law of the Reformation which he applied in his sonnets and plays. 'The tragic equation' is for him 'a mythic expression of the psychological drama then being staged in the conscience, and most of all in the subconscious, of Queen Elisabeth I's subjects'.¹⁰ As Shakespeare's original myth is based

on two traditional myths, the way of combining them takes the form of an equation:

where the first half, by its own inherent dynamics, produces the second half [...] always producing the rebirth into transcendence by the same chemistry. [...] And I have called that particular dynamic event, by which the energies of the first half of the Equation explode, transformed, into the second, ‘the Shakespearean moment’. (Hughes 1992, p. 1)

At the origins of ‘the tragic equation’ is the rejection of the Goddess, which is the result of the hero’s ‘fearful ego-vision’ (p. 215), which splits the character’s personality into two parts. The Goddess is seen not only as the Goddess of love but also as the Goddess of destruction as she might plunge the hero into ruin. She has both her divine and her diabolical sides, the latter usually suppressed by religion (Christianity); this denial of the diabolical is what Shakespeare and Graves both criticize. The division of the Goddess into the Sacred Bride/Divine Mother and the Queen of Hell produces the ‘double vision’ of the hero. In the next phase of the ‘tragic equation’ myth, the hero rejects the Queen of Hell, even fearfully loathing her, which may even result in her being raped, according to Hughes.

There are similarities but also differences in Hughes’s and Graves’s visions of the Goddess. Like Graves, Hughes focuses on the powers of the Goddess. He criticizes the effects of Puritanism on the human psyche, which affects the acceptance and understanding of the Goddess. Like Graves, Hughes also discusses the division of the Goddess. He borrows the story from Graves and explains the triple form of the Goddess as Sacred Bride/Mother/Queen of the Underworld. Graves sees parallel narratives of the myth of the Goddess from ancient Greece to late English Romanticism, while Hughes notices the important conflict of the story, which he elaborates in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. For both writers, on the one hand, there is the

natural order symbolized by the story of Venus, and on the other hand, there are forces that embody logic, rationalism, even chaos symbolized by Richard III, Macbeth, the law-maker Prospero in *The Tempest*, etc. There is always a Goddess-destroying God who embodies the patriarchal principles, the law of order, reason, logic, and violates the rule of the Goddess.

As Hughes cannot accept the loss of the Goddess, which for him, as for Graves, means the loss of poetry, he also works on the re-introduction of the Goddess. In my opinion, Hughes's discussion of the Goddess in Shakespeare's plays seems to be the continuation of ideas Graves expressed in his work. When the normal order is destroyed, it is the Goddess who is invoked to restore it. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the violation of the Goddess and the female principle is corrected in Berowne's passionate conversion to the divinity of love when he delivers the long rhapsody to love's power:

Other slow arts entirely keep the brain
And therefore, finding barren practisers,
Scarce show a harvest of their heavy toil;
But love, first learned in a lady's eyes,
Lives not alone immured in the brain,
But, with the motion of all elements,
Courses as swift as thought in every power,
And gives to every power a double power,
Above their functions and their offices
It adds a precious seeing to the eye;
A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind;
A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound,
When the suspicious head of theft is stopp'd:
Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails:
Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste.
For valour, is not Love of Hercules,
Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?

Subtle as Sphinx; as sweet and musical
As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair;
And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods
Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.¹¹

In the play, the King of Navarra's oath to scholarship excludes woman and the love of women, as Berowne points out with dismay. The plot is made to correct the wrongheaded project and all three lords and the king fall in love. The Princess of France, whom the king falls in love with, has her three ladies, who stand for her three selves, imposing a new mode of life, the one that is centred on the Goddess/princess and her love. Berowne and his friends get converted to the powerful goddess while their course of self-transformation, in a retreat, withdrawn from society, is abandoned. The Goddess and her three selves represent a reformed plan for Lord Berowne and the King. Though Berowne's long speech of his conversion to love's power, made in the tradition of 'courtly love', has little to do with real passion and sensual love, his grand phrases of love are an act to seduce women. Though it is Shakespeare's contribution to courtly love, it easily lends itself to interpretation as the mysterious impact the Goddess has on men and men's submission to her power.

Graves, Herman Sekulić, and Hughes mention those values of humanity (as well as common sense), which have been destroyed by the patriarchy. Graves's complex vision of the Goddess is based on an archetypal pattern and as such served as the basis for Hughes's work. Herman Sekulić traces back the pattern even further to the times of the Vinča culture. Her poem 'Lady of Vinča' gives the prefigured archetype of the White Goddess on the case of the historical events and the archaeological findings of the Vinča figurines, which appeared in different forms and different cultures through time. The poet uses the archetype of the Great Goddess to introduce the motifs of birth, rebirth, love, which dominate the poem, and which is also emphasized in the work of Graves and Hughes. However, this long poem represents

a feminist reading of myth as well as the use of the White Goddess archetype. Herman Sekulić opposes the destruction and the suppression of the female principle by glorifying the new findings and events given from the perspective of the renewed female principle.

The love of the Goddess is the archetypal pattern that all three authors trace in their work. Like many writers, Graves, Herman Sekulić and Hughes tell us a story and create a kind of a labyrinth out of their text. The text leads the reader through a myriad of possibilities guiding them down the paths of the story and its many meanings wherever it might take them. In the labyrinth the beginnings and endings are blurred; the ending becomes only a new beginning. It is the same old story – the one story – as Graves would say: the story of the Goddess and her consort, of the death of the king and his rebirth. A way out of the labyrinth is to tell a story again because the story has a beginning and an end; or at least we think so.

Tanja Cvetković is on The Faculty of Philosophy, University of Nis, Centre for Foreign Languages.

NOTES

¹ Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

² *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, 30 vols, *Interviews with Northrop Frye*, ed. by Jean O'Grady (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008), XXIV, pp. 476-482.

³ *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, 30 vols, *Northrop Frye on Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. by Glen Robert Gill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), XXIX, p. lvi.

⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 118.

⁵ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 14.

⁶ Maja Herman Sekulić, *Gospa od Vinče/Lady of Vinča* (Beograd: Pešić i sinovi, 2017), p. 5.

⁷ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985), II, p. 13.

⁸ Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 273.

⁹ Ted Hughes 1992, p. 5.

¹⁰ Joanny Moulin, ‘History & Reason in the Work of Ted Hughes’, in *History in Literature*, ed. by Hoda Gindi (Cairo: University of Cairo, 1995), p. 67.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 324-345.