

‘Poised There in Conjunction’ with the Muse: Robert Graves’s Dialogue of One in ‘The Face in the Mirror’

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Abstract: A discussion of the binaries in Robert Graves’s poem, ‘The Face in the Mirror’, with particular attention to the trope of a dialogue between an aged man and a younger / adolescent other, as well as other abiding binaries in Graves’s poetic oeuvre. The essay argues for an ecstatic element in ‘The Face in the Mirror’, tracing parallels in language and imagery in Graves’s poems and that of Ramprasad Sen’s, the eighteenth-century Hindu Shakta poet – an ecstatic element central to Graves’s poetic ethos. Helping to illuminate the nature of this element are fruitful comparisons with other English and American poets Graves admired, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Frost, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and John Donne. Drawn meaningfully into the argument are moments from the author’s invitation to meet Robert Graves in Deia in February 1977.

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The Face in the Mirror

Grey haunted eyes, absent-mindedly glaring
From wide, uneven orbits; one brow drooping
Somewhat over the eye
Because of a missile fragment still inhering,
Skin deep, as a foolish record of old-world fighting.

Crookedly broken nose – low tackling caused it;
Cheeks, furrowed; coarse grey hair, flying frenetic;
Forehead, wrinkled and high;

Jowls, prominent; ears, large; jaw, pugilistic;
Teeth, few; lips, full and ruddy; mouth, ascetic.

I pause with razor poised, scowling derision
At the mirrored man whose beard needs my attention,
And once more ask him why
He still stands ready, with a boy's presumption,
To court the queen in her high silk pavilion.

'The Face in the Mirror', first published in 1957,¹ when Graves was sixty-two years old, has recently been in focus, thanks to detailed relooks by Michael Joseph and Peter MacDonald at what is truly 'a marvellously complex, essential poem, which seems to have otherwise been overlooked in Graves criticism'.² Taking note of the poem's innovativeness, David Mason has also remarked:

Trying to think why we should still read Robert Graves, who can seem these days a minor if prolific writer, I turn to poems like 'The Face in the Mirror'. It's all there – the mythologizing of love bordering on lunacy, the flat-out realism of a man who was once pronounced dead in battle and survived to look squarely at the hypocrisy of the society that had put him there, the mastered verse technique allowing for patterns of thought as well as physical experience. By now, many poets have written their 'face in the mirror' poems, but when Graves did it, he was being innovative.³

The crux of the almost antithetical perspectives offered by the two essays mentioned above is whether the old poet's readiness – with 'a boy's presumption' – 'to court the queen in her high silk pavilion' carries even a suggestion of sensual desire and courtship. MacDonald sees it analogous to the desperate 'lust and rage' that, according to him, Yeats justifies as the source of poetic inspiration in old age, although even in youth, before he was twenty, Yeats made his first denunciation of old age in 'The Wanderings of Usheen'. Macdonald supports his reading of Yeats's 'lust and rage' by linking it, among other things, to Graves's use of 'plague' as

synonymous with Muse's inspiration. Such an interpretation, however, overlooks 'innocent temerity', to use a phrase from 'The Cliff Edge' that Graves associates with 'boy's presumption'. In the boy's daring devotion, the sensual desire and the spiritual longing may coexist as 'sweet torment' but without old man's 'lust and rage'.⁴ In Graves's love-ethic, 'being in love' with the Muse is a risk-taking devotion without circumspection:

To spring impetuously in air and remain
Treading on air for three heart-beats or four,
Then to descend at leisure; or else to scale
The forward-tilted crag with no hand-holds;
Or, disembodied, to carry roses home
From a Queen's garden – this is being in love,
Graced with *agilitas* and *subtilitas*
At which few famous lovers ever guessed
Though children may foreknow it, deep in dream,
And ghosts may mourn it, haunting their own tombs,
And peacocks cry it, in default of speech.⁵

In a wide-ranging analysis, drawing on ontological, etymological and literary sources, Michael Joseph points out that '[l]ust per se never enters the poem', and that 'The Face is an act of presumptuous self-exhibition and self-assessment that reveals the irrational aspiration, not for hetero-or-any other kind of sexual courtship, but to articulate poetic truth' (Joseph, p. 125). Indeed, lust *per se* never enters Graves's love poems except occasionally when he evokes it in a mock-heroic mode in 'Down, Wanton, Down!' Graves makes a key distinction between the naked and the nude where the erotic is validated only by love and the nude is associated with loveless lust unless 'Love swear loyalty to your crown'.

Nonetheless, Graves is consistently oblique or 'temperate', to use Fran Brearton's phrase, in dealing with the sensual / erotic aspect of love. Joseph acknowledges this 'as a subordinate, secondary, analogue' and attributes it to verbal economy and semantic structure:

In Graves's verbal economy, the amorous sense of 'courting' seized on by MacDonald is not lost but subsumed in the semantic structure as a subordinate, secondary, analogue: to prepare oneself for inspiration may be likened to the traditional rite of courtship. [...] The similitude of courtship emphasises the poet's intensity and loyalty of purpose, his singleness of mind, while it also implies hopelessness, impertinence, self-delusion. [...] We see this appealing self-effacing clownishness in 'Love Without Hope' (for example a poem from *Welchman's Hose* (1925). (Joseph, p. 125)

Equally, the sensual aspect of courting the queen prefigures as a quintessential premise of Graves's love-ethic or Muse-ethic which he formulated in *The White Goddess* and which is referred to in his interviews: 'No Muse-poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident'.⁶ This has, I believe, a bearing on our interpretation of whether the old poet's readiness 'with a boy's presumption, | To court the queen in her high silk pavilion' is simply spiritual /religious or, as I hope to show, a state of consciousness which Graves calls 'the necessary trance' or 'the paranoiac trance' in which reality and royalty, sensual and spiritual are, to use Graves's own words 'conjoined' or 'poised' like light and dark in twilight or like hot and cold in the temperate Mediterranean climate. 'It is no terror of Caucasian frost, | Nor yet that brooding Hindu heat': 'In [poetic] thought the seasons run concurrently'. Or 'Poised there in conjunction' on 'the threshold of relative consciousness' – *Bhavamukha* to use a phrase used by Ramakrishna, the Indian devotee of the Goddess Kali (the Divine Mother) mentioned by Graves in *The White Goddess* to which I shall return later.

This temperate or oblique articulation is both a matter of temperament and ideology. The 'perpetually obsessed' Muse poet does not need to 'prepare' himself for inspiration: he is forever ready and in 'sweet torment' or in 'plague' like the young bird-catcher to risk everything for the Muse:

Love without hope, as when the young bird-catcher
Swept off his tall hat to the Squire's own daughter,
So let the imprisoned larks escape and fly
Singing about her head, as she rode by. (*Complete Poems*,
2003, p. 227)

D. N. G. Carter rightly sees the poem as 'a perfect Edwardian motto to an emblem of the poet's worship of the Goddess'⁷, even though, as Judith Wolf notes, '[t]here is little that overtly suggests the hidden presence of the Goddess in the thirty-five pellucid words that make up the poem.'⁸ It is significant, however, that a twenty-six-year-old-poet Graves preferred to substitute a young bird-catcher for the 'bald and plump and middle-aged' fowler suggested by William Nicholson in a sketch 'The Bird-catcher in Love' for a rhyme 'for Nancy to illustrate' (Wolf, p. 438). In making this change, was Graves, subconsciously, foreshadowing 'innocent temerity' or 'the boy's presumption' in courting the Muse as integral to his love-ethic.

'Love Without Hope' was more like a commissioned caption and therefore did not include the other part of Graves's love-ethic. The devoted or devotee love-poet courts the Muse/White/Black Goddess to help him overcome his own sense of imperfection which distracts him from his devotion. In fact, eight years before 'Love Without Hope', Graves articulated this love-ethic in 1923 in 'Sullen Moods',⁹ arguably a revised version of 'The Spoilspout', published in 1917:¹⁰ 'Spying on our privacy', the 'Critic, son of Conscious Brain' reminds the poet of his 'shortcomings, plagues, uncertainties'. Apologetic about the loss, the poet in 'Sullen Moods' entreats the beloved in the manner that is used in later poems to invoke the queen in high silk pavilion:

Be once again the distant light,
Promise of glory, not yet known
In full perfection – wasted quite
When on my imperfection thrown.

The origin of this poem, as Paul O'Prey reminds us, lies in Graves's struggles with his neurasthenia and 'the collapse of the romantic dream he had tried to act out in marriage' with Nancy Nicholson, but 'it is also the clearest expression of the undoubted connection between Graves's neurasthenia and his vision of love, as he repeats his gratitude for having been rescued by the beloved from insanity and near death.'¹¹

Observing his physical imperfection and war-time wounds in 'The Face in the Mirror', the older poet seems caught, momentarily, between rhyme and reason, the two pulls of his sensibility, so to speak, which the young bird-catcher or the poet in the nursery is not conscious of yet. The lover-poet's sense of imperfection keeps returning in various garbs, like a spy, a critic, a reader over the shoulder or like a twin, at times fighting and at others reactivating / reinforcing 'boy's presumption'. Each encounter with the Muse is an occasion for the poet 'stammering out praise of you, | Like a boy owning his first love' gratitude for the gift of 'the especial sight' which is to be able to see best in 'half-light', like Keats, as Graves has said, and experience being 'poised there in conjunction' with the Muse in relative consciousness.¹²

In Graves's poems about love, while there is little dramatic or dialogic interaction or interplay between the poet and the Muse, it is '[w]ithin [poetic] Reason' that the 'still imperfect body' of the poet may receive gentle 'stabs of joy' when she / You / the Muse / the Goddess has 'wandered widely through' her own mind and her perfect body:

To stand perplexed by love's consequences
Like fire-flies in your hair
Or distant flashes of a summer storm:
Such are the stabs of joy you deal me
Who also wander widely through my mind
And still imperfect body.¹³

Such 'stabs of joy' come in 'Hercules at Nemea' when the Muse 'most amorously' bites 'through the poet's fool's finger' and 'My beard bristles in exultation' as a 'horripilant' reward for the poet's

daring devotion. By the same token, therefore, ‘once more ask him’ with ‘the razor poised’ for shaving his beard in ‘The Face in the Mirror’ suggests no murderous or subliminal thought of ‘self-despatch’ or for that matter even dispatch of the mirror as Shakespeare’s Richard II does to shatter the carrier of an unflattering reflection. To my mind, when the speaker ‘pauses with razor poised’ (l. 11), the plethora of sibilants and assonance brings suggests the anticipated horripilant sensation that the Muse dressed in a rustling silk gown.

In fact, in Graves’s love-ethic, even for the Muse to ‘face’ her own eyes in the mirror is a sign of inner strength and healing. While the young bird-catcher in his ‘innocent temerity’, unlike the old man, is not ‘plagued by his own scruples’, the poet-lover, ‘plagued by his own scruples’, is forced to concede in ‘A Court of Love’ that while the poet is bound the Muse is ever free:

Were you to break the vow we swore together,
The vow, I said, would break you utterly:
Despite your pleas of duty elsewhere owed,
You could no longer laugh, work, heal, do magic,
Nor in the mirror face your own eyes.

They have summoned me before their Court of Love
And warned me I must sign for your release
Pledging my word never again to draft
A similar pact, as one who has presumed
Lasting felicity still unknown in time.
What should I do? Forswear myself for you?
No man in love, plagued by his own scruples
Will ever, voluntarily, concede
That women have a spirit above vows. (*Complete Poems*,
2003, p. 565)

Graves’s dialogue with his mirrored ageing self and his inner younger / adolescent other in ‘The Face in the Mirror’ is a poetic credo and stands out in comparison not only with Yeats’s interactive reflections with his inner/outer ‘you’ in ‘The Spur’ and

with Hardy's in 'I Look into My Glass' but more so with the luminous but unchanging abstractions in 'With the Face' by Laura Riding, once Graves's friend, Muse, and collaborator:

The mirror mixes with the eye.
Soon will it be the very eye.
[...]
Death, the final image, will shine
Transparently not otherwise
Than as the dark sun described
With such faint brightnesses.¹⁴

Envisioned through the eye of a mathematician as it were, Riding enunciates the ultimate equalising of the mirror, the face, the doubting eye, the young self and the old self into 'Death, the final image, [that] will shine | Transparently not otherwise'. There are echoes of this poem in Graves's 'The Foolish Senses', written under the shadow of Riding's dictum 'bodies have had their day'. In the poem, rather untypically, Graves is not just admonishing his senses but banishing them, especially the 'foolish eye', for falsifying 'the view [that] is inward':

No more, senses, shall you so confound me,
Playing your pageants through
That have outlived their uses in my mind –
Your outward staring that is inward blind
And the mad strummings of your melancholy,
Let them cease now. (*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 330)

Twenty-seven years later, through 'outward staring' at his injured face that survived the stabs of death in the First World War, the aged poet with 'lips, full and ruddy; mouth ascetic' looks inward and still *sees* a shimmer in his 'grey haunted eyes'. This dialogue of one demonstrates that old, scarred bodies and foolish senses, however shadowy, remain our stepping stones to the high silk pavilion of the Muse whose 'sweet employ' as Coleridge, a poet whom Graves admired, put it:

Exalts my soul, refines my breast,
Gives each pure pleasure keener zest,
And softens sorrow into pensive Joy.¹⁵

Is the speaker in Graves's poem looking with the eyes of a young boy at the unattractive face of an old man 'whose beard needs my attention'? Or is the old man surprised at his lingering boyish desire to risk everything to court the queen? There is neither rage nor self-pity aroused in the speaker by the almost clinical catalogue of physical injuries and incongruities in the first two stanzas. Likewise, in Hardy's poem, the speaker looking 'into My Glass' and at 'my wasting skin' is more pained by how he is perceived by 'hearts grown cold to me' than by his old age because he feels reassured by 'throbbings of noontide' that 'Time [...] | Part steals, lets part abide'. He, too, does not bemoan his imperfection or old age because 'A lover without indiscretion is no lover at all. Circumspection and devotion are a contradiction in terms'.¹⁶

For Graves, '[t]o be a poet is a condition rather than a profession' in which with a sense of 'imperfect body' the poet – 'docile as a Boy' and 'obedient to her eye' – awaits to be led by the Perfect Muse, the Moon Goddess, the way 'She leads the Sea' as Emily Dickinson, too, envisioned:

The Moon is distant from the Sea –
And yet, with Amber Hands –
She leads Him – docile as a Boy –
Along appointed Sands –

He never misses a Degree –
Obedient to Her eye –
He comes just so far –toward the Town –
Just so far – goes away –

Oh, Signor, Thine, the Amber Hand –
And mine – the distant Sea –
Obedient to the least command
Thine eye impose on me –¹⁷

The Moon Goddess leads the sea in a conjoined, though fluctuating, sensuous relationship suggested by the ebb and flow in the first two stanzas. In the closing extended metaphor, the woman speaker, too, follows her lover with similar docility. In 'Cliff and Wave', Graves uses a similar metaphor to convey the fluctuating 'co-identical' relationship rather than 'in wedlock harboured' together between the poet and the Muse to feel stabs of joy in the 'brief dismay of parting', as well as a momentary stay against sensuous / sensual profusion:

Since first you drew my irresistible wave
To break in foam on our immovable cliff.
We occupy the same station of being –
Not as in wedlock harboured close together,
But beyond reason, co-identical.
Now when our bodies hazard an encounter,
They dread to engage the fury of their senses,
And only in brief dismay of parting
Will your cliff shiver or my wave falter. (*Complete Poems*,
2003, p. 668)

II

Robert Graves walking up to a mirror and reciting 'The Face in the Mirror' in the video clip 'Man in the Mirror'¹⁸ of a 1950s film footage has none of the spontaneous 'docile as a boy' smile of the young bird-catcher that I witnessed when Graves read out 'The Green-Sailed Vessel' during my second meeting with him in February 1977.

On the afternoon of the day (Tuesday, 1 Feb) I arrived in Deiá, I walked down Ramon Llull from Hostal Villa Verde, which Marjorie Phillips, a friend, who knew Beryl and the Graves family, had recommended. It happened to be Almond Blossom season, so I thought I would explore the ambience and perhaps drop in to say hello to Robert and Beryl. When I reached Canelun I saw through the half open gate a car with its left door open and someone sitting

on the right front seat. I paused but the man beckoned with his hand. When I came closer, I saw it was Robert himself. I introduced myself. His eyes brightened up with a smile and he said 'For luck!' when I offered him a small carved ivory image of goddess Durga which I had brought for him from Delhi. Just then Beryl, who had gone back to the house to pick up something she had forgotten, returned. She said that they were off to Palma but that she would get in touch and indeed she telephoned at Villa Verde and invited me to supper on Sunday 6 Feb. Catherine Dalton had come from Palma. Martin Seymour-Smith (who was then working on Robert's biography) and his wife, Janet, were also present.

After supper, while we were chatting, I noticed a framed poem mounted on a flat pillar that partitioned the dining room and the stairs leading to the kitchen above. I got up and saw that it was 'The Green-Sailed Vessel', one of my favourite poems. I asked Robert if he would kindly read it out. He got up and read it slowly, with thoughtful pauses. Beautiful, we said, as he finished. He turned around and, blushing with gleaming eyes and fingers on his cheek, said: 'Did I write that?' Standing next to him I nodded, and Beryl said loudly, as others nodded: 'Yes, Robert, of course, you did!'

That, indeed, is the image of the old poet reading 'The Green-Sailed Vessel' 'like a boy owning his first love' ('The Ages of Oath') that 'The Face in the Mirror' evokes for me, as much as it reminds me of 'A Lover Since Childhood' in which the poet asks:

Tangled in thought am I,
Stumble in speech do I?
Do I blunder and blush for the reason why? (*Complete Poems*, 2000, p. 121)

This unselfconsciously sensual and spiritual devotion which 'a boy's presumption' evokes in 'The Face in the Mirror' – and not the 'old man's frenzy' that some critics may read in it – is also foreshadowed in 'The Poet in the Nursery' that opens *Over the Brazier* (1916) where the young poet, groping 'down the shelves

[...] fumbling in a dim library', grasps a book of poetry and 'with quick hands like a lover', subliminally discovers the Muse:

I took the book to bed with me and gloated,
Learning the line that seemed to sound most grand;
So soon the lively emerald green was coated
With intimate dark stains from my hot hand,
While round the nursery for long months there floated
Wonderful words no one could understand. (*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 3)

Rather than a dialogic interaction between the poet and the Muse, Graves's love poem is a celebratory state of mind, a 'hap'/ 'happening' in which the poet is visited by the Muse as a fulfilment of the awaited moment: 'taken in trance, would she still deny | That you are hers, she yours, till both shall die' ('Trance at a Distance', *Poems*, p. 523) . 'Let us not undervalue lips or arms | As reassurances of constancy.' The presence of the Muse / Queen / Goddess who is free and beyond vows of constancy is felt not as meditative stillness but as a real or imagined shudder,

To be assured by a single shudder
Wracking both hearts, and underneath the press
Of clothes by a common nakedness.

In 'The Naked and the Nude' (1960), a purported rejoinder to Kenneth Clark's *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1956) that he claimed not to have read,¹⁹ Graves enunciates a preference for the primal nakedness whether in love or in death, as distinct from loveless nudity, an analogy articulated in early poems such as 'The Kiss' (1919) and 'Love in Barrenness' (1923). It is nakedness 'poised' between the sensual and the spiritual:

The Northwind rose. I saw him press
With lusty force against your dress,
Moulding your body's inward grace
And streaming off your face;

So no longer flesh and blood
But poised in marble light you stood. (*Complete Poems*,
2003, p. 122)

III

In his love-ethic, Graves is consistent in maintaining that the relationship between the poet and the Muse / Goddess is one of *lifelong* love through the agency of a muse / living woman.

No Muse-poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident [...] A Muse-poet falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse. [...] But the real, perpetually obsessed Muse-poet distinguishes between the Goddess as manifest in the supreme power, glory, wisdom, and love of woman, and the individual woman whom the Goddess may make her instrument [...] The Goddess abides; and perhaps he will again have knowledge of her through his experience of another woman.²⁰

Graves elaborates the nature of this courtship in which *reality* and *royalty* are conjoined, while making clear that he is not 'proposing a revival of Muse worship, with temples, high priestesses, and liturgies; for poetry cannot be ecclesiasticized.'

To employ West African terms, a goddess or god is an abstraction unless she or he has a *sunsum* as well as a *kra* – *kra* meaning natural divine power, *sunsum* meaning an agreed personality. [...] The Muse's *sunsum* may vary with the language she speaks, but her *kra* remains constant. She first possesses some woman of what I call 'royal nature' – 'royalty' and 'reality' are the same word – and it is the woman as goddess who entrances a poet, prompting him to celebrate her immortal attributes. Sometimes she speaks from

her own mouth in the Goddess's name, but such women poets are rare.²¹

'The poetic trance where the poet is ridden by the Muse' is, however, not 'a saintly mysticism of not-being in which woman figures only as an emblem of the soul's surrender to the creative lust of God'. The 'depth of love is never gauged | By proof of appetites assuaged'. Nor is the poet's 'perfect love' for the Muse comparable to 'odious', though 'ecstatic bonds of monk or nun' ('Depth of Love' in *Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 678). Nor is it, as Graves insists, *samadhi*, recommended by Aldous Huxley,²² who (like Max Müller and Romain Rolland) was influenced by Ramakrishna Parmahansa (1836–1886), the celebrated Indian worshipper of Goddess Kali and mystic, because, as Graves puts it, it is synonymous with 'the unchivalrous rejection of the Goddess' (*White Goddess*, 1961 p. 485) and is comparable to

a psychopathic condition, a spiritual orgasm, indistinguishable from the ineffably beautiful moment, described by Dostoievsky, which precedes an epileptic fit. Indian mystics induce it at will by fasting and meditation, as the Essenes and early Christian and Mohammedan saints also did.' (Ibid, p. 484)

Graves explains this further in his comments on Ramakrishna:

At first he devoted himself to Kali-worship with true poetic ecstasy like his predecessor Ramprasad Sen (1718–1775); when he grew to manhood, allowed himself to be seduced [...] into orthodox techniques of devotion. He became an ascetic saint of the familiar type with devoted disciples and a Gospel of ethics posthumously published, and was fortunate enough to marry a woman of the same mystic capacities as himself who, by agreeing to forgo physical consummation, helped him to illustrate the possibility of a purely spiritual union of the sexes. Though he did not need to declare war on the Female, as Jesus had done, he set himself painfully to

‘dissolve his vision of the Goddess’ in order to achieve the ultimate bliss of samadhi, or communion with the Absolute; holding that the Goddess, who was both the entangler and the liberator of physical man, has no place in that remote esoteric Heaven. (*White Goddess*, 1961, pp. 483–84)

This is not the occasion to rebut Graves’s assertion that Jesus declared war on the Female, but to offer a more complete perspective on Ramakrishna because, although neither educated nor a poet himself, he continued to worship the Goddess Kali at Dakshineswar Temple till he died, singing songs of Ramaprasad Sen, an eighteenth-century poet-saint, whom Graves quotes with approval. Some of these songs are included in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.²³

Ramakrishna regarded his wife, Sarada Devi, not just a spiritual consort but also a manifestation of the Goddess – ‘the Divine Mother.’²⁴ As John Flicker puts it: ‘The Śoḍaśī-pūjā, in which Ramakrishna worshiped his wife Sarada Devi as the living goddess Śoḍaśī, provides a clear and subversive template to establish a unique form of feminism rooted in Kālī-bhakti.’²⁵ Ramakrishna’s closest disciple Vivekananda and the founder of Ramakrishna Mission, records: ‘Mother Kali was Sri Ramakrishna’s overwhelming reality. He sang to her, had visions of her, spoke intimately to her, and heard her voice.’²⁶

Claiming that the Divine Mother had so wished, Ramakrishna got initiated by Bhairvi Brahmani, a female ascetic, to experience through Tantric rituals ‘the great ecstatic love’ (*madhura bhava* or sweet mood or mode of being) of Radha for the vision of Sri Krishna, god of love and devotion claimed by some as the first feminist. Again, three years later, following the voice of the Divine Mother, Ramakrishna got initiated by Totapuri, a wandering naked monk, to experience the ecstasy of ‘formless trance’ of non-dualism (*nirvikalpa*) or to use Graves’s epithet, ‘spiritual orgasm’. Ramakrishna emerged from this trance, three days later, to rejoice henceforth in *Bhavamukha* – a phrase he claimed he had heard from the Divine Mother – i.e. to ‘remain on the threshold of relative

consciousness' or the relative state of dualism (Dvaita) and non-dualism (Advaita).²⁷ As he put it:

The personal and the impersonal are the same thing, like milk and its whiteness, the diamond and its lustre, the snake and its wriggling motion. It is impossible to conceive of the one without the other. The Divine Mother and Brahman are one.²⁸

The vibrant image of the snake and its wriggling motion – the *ouroboros* – embodying both the sensual and the transcendent also figures in Hinduism as *Kundalini* ('coiled snake' in Sanskrit). The image is associated with Goddess Shakti, also known as Durga and Kali, and is an important concept in Śhaiva Tantra. In his poems and in *The White Goddess*, Graves celebrates Kali who 'like her counterpart Minerva, has five as her sacred numeral' and whom 'the poet Ramprasad, addresses her as she dances madly on Siva's prostrate body: My heart is five lotuses. You building these five into one, dance and swell in my mind' (*White Goddess*, 1961, p. 411). And Graves goes on to add: 'There are two sides to the worship of the Indian Goddess Kali: her right side as benefactress and universal mother, her left side as fury and ogress' (ibid, p. 445).

It is significant that Jung also recognized *ouroboros* or *Kundalini* as the female principle in a seminar presented to the Psychological Club in Zurich in 1932. The *ouroboros* is 'a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e. of the shadow'.²⁹ Jung added that 'the concept of *Kundalini* has for us only one use, that is, to describe our own experiences with the unconscious'.³⁰:

Sakti-Kundaline or Devi-Kundalini is a goddess. She is the female principle, the self manifesting power which surrounds the gem at the center, the gold seed, the jewel, the pearl the egg. The *Kundalini* serpent is, however, Devi-Kundalini, a chain of glittering lights, the 'world bewilderer'.³¹

It is true that in 1952 Graves dismissed Jung on three counts, even ‘though he never read a word by Jung’ as Martin Seymour-Smith informs us.³² First, Graves argues, Jung had ‘no gift for concise expression, nor poetic understanding, nor sense of history’.³³ Secondly, Jung championed, like Freud, ‘a humourless and watertight psychological system’, which as a precondition involves submission to psychoanalysis and acceptance of ‘all its weird findings’ (ibid). Thirdly, Graves was unsure whether Jung was right in not distinguishing between ‘archetypes or primordial images which manifest themselves at all times in religion, mysticism, alchemy’ and those that manifest ‘in the dreams, visions and fantasies brought to light in the consulting room’. Graves is therefore ambivalent: ‘Jung holds that such primordial obsessions are inherited, and I would not contradict him, though it is doubtful how far the actual image, rather than a predisposition to recognize and perpetuate it, is inherited’.³⁴

‘Serpent’s Tail’ reflects this underlying ambivalence. Graves evokes the threshold of relative consciousness – *Bhavamukha* – the wriggling motion of Devi-Kundalini through a marked consonance of laterals and labials to convey his love-ethic that conjoins the sensual and the transcendent, the living Muse and the eternal Goddess:

When you are *old* as I now am
I shall be young as you, my *lamb*;
For *lest* love’s timely force should fail
The serpent swallows his own tail. (emphases mine)
(*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 664)

Rather than the unpredictable, though inevitable, time’s force, it is the desirable and desired ‘love’s timely force’, or ‘delight in the momentariness’ of ‘that shivering glory not to be despised’ that is the romantic premise behind the ‘boy’s presumption to court the queen in high silk pavilion’. It may be like a death grapple with a water snake only to be gently caressed through a stream of laterals and sibilants into ‘a childish innocent smile’ and ‘the lineaments of love’:

Lying between your sheets, I challenge
A watersnake in a *swoln* cataract
Or a starved lioness among drifts of snow.

Yet dare it out, for after each death grapple,
Each gorgon stare borrowed from very hate,
A childish *innocent* smile touches your lips,
Your eyelids droop, fearless and careless,
And sleep remoulds the *lineaments* of love. (*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 501)

Or become each other like ‘an eternal serpent’ in ‘Song: To Become Each Other’:

For man and woman
To become each other
Is far less hard
Than would seem to be:
An eternal serpent
With eyes of emerald
Stands curled around
This blossoming tree. (*Ibid*, p. 681)

IV

Given the nature of Graves’s ‘poetic trance’, there is a tantalising obliqueness in Graves’s portrayal of the sensual aspect of love, which is why, as Brian Jones has also noted, ‘it is often impossible to tell whether the feminine pronoun refers to woman or Goddess or both; not that this is necessarily an adverse criticism.’³⁵ Blake Morrison, too, points out that ‘Graves does sometimes address a “you”, but she remains a shadow across the bed or a goddess wafting through a classical landscape’.³⁶ This blurred or rather conjoined identity of the Muse and the Goddess, *sunsum* and *kra*, in Graves’s love poems is, as I have suggested above, because his poetic trance is analogous to *Bhavamukha*, ‘the threshold of relative

consciousness', the joyous borderline of the sensuous / sensual and the spiritual that Ramakrishna, notwithstanding his personal asceticism, claimed to discover under the direction of Kali, the Divine Mother. In 'Conjunction', Graves celebrates this togetherness as being 'poised there in conjunction' to experience the desire to be beyond desire:

What happens afterwards, none need enquire:
They are poised there in conjunction, beyond time,
At an oak-tree top level with Paradise:
Its leafy tester unshaken where they stand
Palm to palm, mouth to mouth, beyond desire,
Perpetuating lark song, perfume, colour,
And the tremulous gasp of watchful winds.
(*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 576)

'Tranquillity is of no poetic use' in Graves and 'the passionate trance' or 'the poetic trance where the poet is ridden by the Muse' is neither physical nor spiritual stillness but one 'out of which you can be wakened by interruption as from a dream'. In fact, it is the same thing.³⁷ It is the threshold of relative consciousness or *Bhavamukha*, so to speak, where the poet-devotee can delight in the manifestation of the muse in the living woman, as well as in spiritual apprehension of the Queen / Goddess in her high silk pavilion. A sense of movement, a welcome interruption or a suggested walk with open eyes in twilight – Graves claimed that he saw best in twilight – but not motionless trance is also evident in some of the songs composed by Ramprasad Sen that Ramakrishna also sang, as for example:

This ardent poet of the Goddess cries:
Every lover longs only
to gaze upon the unique Beloved.
Why close your eyes?
Why disappear into formless trance? ³⁸

Or:

Come, let us go for a walk, O mind,
to Kali, the Wish-fulfilling Tree
And there beneath It gather the four fruits of life.
Of your two wives, Dispassion and Wordliness [...]³⁹

Or in this song:

She's playing in my heart.
Whatever I think, I think Her name.
I close my eyes and She's in there
Garlanded with human heads.⁴⁰

Compare the invocation of the Goddess Kali in this song by
Ramprasad Sen:

This mysterious Goddess, eternally sixteen,
is naked brilliance, transparent insight.
Cascades of black hair stream down her back
to touch her dancing feet.⁴¹

And this celebration of the Black Goddess:

Who is that Syama [dark / black] woman
standing on *Bhava*?
[...]
overturning sexual custom
by being on top.⁴²

With Graves's hymnal invocation in 'The White Goddess':

Green sap of Spring in the young wood a-stir
Will celebrate the Mountain Mother,
And every song-bird shout awhile for her;
But I am gifted, even in November
Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense
Of her nakedly worn magnificence
I forget cruelty and past betrayal,

Careless of where the next bright bolt may fall. (*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 428)

And in 'Her Beauty':

Let me put on record for posterity
The uniqueness of her beauty:
Her black eyes fixed unblinking on my own,
Cascading hair, high breasts, firm nose,
Soft mouth and dancer's toes.

Which is, I grant, cautious concealment
Of a new Muse by the Immortals sent
For me to honour worthily –
Her eyes brimming with tears of more than love,
Her lips gentle, moving secretly –

And she is also the dark hidden bride
Whose beauty I invoke for lost sleep:
To last the whole night through without dreaming –
Even when waking is to wake in pain
And summon her to grant me sleep again. (*Complete Poems*,
2003, p. 692)

'Mother Wisdom is tantric,' as Lex Hixon points out, 'which means that she reveals relative existence as her divine theatre – in Ramprasad's words, "a country fair for those mad with love", or elsewhere, "the country fair of Mother's sheer delight"'.⁴³

V

In her perceptive Chatterton Lecture, 'Robert Graves and The White Goddess', Fran Brearton reviews the poet's rich multilayered background and his complex poetic practice and legitimately asks 'how do we reconcile Graves's temperate style with the poet of *The White Goddess* who makes a case for being over-whelmed through

“religious invocation?”⁴⁴ One explanation of this paradox is, as I have tried to show, that the poetic trance of ‘the real perpetually obsessed Muse poet’ – as Graves sees himself – distinct from a Muse poet – operates at the twilight conjunction of the sensual and the spiritual, the threshold of relative consciousness or *Bhavamukha*.

Both for personal and ideological reasons, Graves is temperate in portraying sensual love. Arguably, as Martin Seymour-Smith points out, ‘Graves was unconsciously stating Don Juanism under an inherited pious system’. Equally, Graves is impelled to reconcile in poetry the two components of his sensibility: the self which obsessively explores historical fact and mythical constructions on the one hand, and the passionate Romantic self, haunted by the magic world of love, on the other. In a letter to Alan Hodge, dated July 21, 1943, Graves wrote:

I distinguish between the Apollonian poems I write, and the other sort, by the depth of the trance and the painfulness of interruption. [...] But trance is a word of degree; there are many levels of the mind and perhaps even the intellectual poem produces something comparable to a trance, call it a brown study. [...] In the intellectual poem, there is no emotion, even ‘sublimated’, but only a satisfaction in the beauty of the poetic argument; and perhaps irony is an essential substitute in such a poem.⁴⁵

This also explains why his non-Muse poems such as ‘The Cool Web’, ‘In Broken Images’, and ‘The Reader over My Shoulder’ have ‘suppressed emotion’ while they posit the contraries and opposites: heart and mind, feeling and reason, irrational and rational, desiring and awaiting their reconciliation or a creative conjunction before the visitation of the Muse. In ‘Antigonus: An Eclogue’, there is John, the poet and James, a literary historian whereas in ‘Twin Souls’ a glutton and a hermit form the contraries. In ‘Antinomies’ the speaker-poet is in a dialogue with the Muse who, expressing dissatisfaction, urges him to sing a fuller song:

‘My grass-hid muse whirred her dissatisfaction,
Critical Box and Cox, Roe against Doe,
Unsolved antinomies, have you nothing else?
Sing, child, a fuller song. Sing, Sing,’ she trilled. (*Complete Poems*, 2000, p. 86 (p. 186))

In theoretical terms, *The White Goddess* explores and affirms the coexistence of the opposites in the poet: ‘The scholar is a quarry-man, not a builder, and all that is required of him is that he should quarry cleanly. He is the poet’s insurance against factual error. [...] His [the poet’s] function is truth, whereas the scholar’s is fact’ (*White Goddess*, 1961, p. 224). As he writes in ‘Broken Images,’ ‘When the fact fails him, he questions his senses; | When the fact fails me, I approve my senses’ (*Complete Poems*, 2000, p. 296). What if like other antinomies they coexist in the poet, too. Yet, excess of either is self-defeating and a kind of death.

In ‘The Cool Web’, if ‘Children are dumb to say how hot the day is’ it is because with their ‘innocent temerity’ they feel its intensity directly, whereas the eloquent and voluble adults ‘spell away’ the intensity of this sensuous experience. In this complex poem, as Carol Rumens points out:

There’s also a shifting lexical pattern. Stanza three, line four, sounds a seductive Latinate diapason: ‘We grow sea-green at last and coldly die | In brininess and volubility.’ The poem was written many years before *The White Goddess*, but could the wateriness and sea-greenness advert to the third of the Goddess’s three aspects (birth, erotic love and death)? *The poet, perhaps, imagines losing his muse in an excess of self-consciousness and word-wit.* ‘Brininess and volubility’ are a dangerous if splendid duo⁴⁶ (italics mine).

Either extreme by itself and in itself, even though worth exploring, will lead to being swamped into a kind of death. Unlike the ‘four seasons in the mind of man’, each with its varying intensity, that Keats celebrates in ‘The Human Seasons’, in Graves’s temperate or ‘conjoined’ climate of poetic thought or

rather experience, 'the seasons run concurrently', and 'a cool web of language winds us in' where the sensual and the spiritual are conjoined:

The climate of thought has seldom been described.
It is no terror of Caucasian frost,
Nor yet that brooding Hindu heat
For which a loin-cloth and a dish of rice
Suffice until the pestilent monsoon
But without winter, blood would run too thin;
Or, without summer, fires would burn too long.
In thought the seasons run concurrently. (*Complete Poems*,
2003, p. 382)

Using the metaphor of courtship, rather than of dialectical argument, in 'Address to Self', Graves explores the ontological implications of a divided You and I, heart and mind, body and soul and their desire to bed together 'in loving discourse'. Arguably, an Apollonian poem with 'suppressed emotion' in a 'confessional' mode where in a dialogue of one, apparently, it is the poet's voice seeking cooperation from his divided self. Yet the lines are blurred 'in damned confusion of myself and you' or hopefully conjoined with the poet's voice as adjudicator:

Our loves are cloaked, our times are variable,
We keep our rooms and meet only at table.

But come, dear self, agree that you and I
Shall henceforth court each other's company.
And bed in peace together now and fall
In loving discourse, as were natural,

With open heart and mind, both alike bent
On a just verdict, not on argument,

And hide no private longing, each from each,
And wear one livery and employ one speech.

I worked against you with my intellect,
You against me with folly and neglect,

Making a pack with flesh, the alien one:
Which brought me into strange confusion

For as mere flesh I spurned you, slow to see
This was to acknowledge flesh as part of me. (*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 823)

In another dialogue of one, 'The Unpenned Poem', the poet seeks help from both his selves for their creative conjunction in the hope that the poem 'yet unpenned' may be released. Pointing to his physical wounds and wrinkled skin as a badge of imperfection, the poet, missing the innocent temerity or boy's presumption of the pleads with both Rhyme and Reason:

Approach me, Rhyme; advise me, Reason!
The wind blows gently from the mountain top.
Let me display three penetrative wounds
White and smooth in this wrinkled skin of mine,
Still unacknowledged by the flesh beneath. (Ibid, p. 721)

'The Unpenned Poem' is a poem about the real poem that is yet to be that may thrust its head serpent / ouroboros-like unexpectedly:

A poem may be trapped here suddenly
Thrusting its adder's head among the leaves,
Without reason or rhyme, dumb –
Or if not dumb, then with a single voice
Robbed of its chorus. (Ibid)

The tone and temper of such poems is more like balancing one mode against the other and hoping for a 'loving discourse' between the two selves in readiness for a Moon poem, an unpredictable gift from the Muse. In Graves, if these contraries remain in a state of poised conjunction, without distracting the poet, he will be more

fully prepared for and receptive to the unpredictable visit of the Muse. For Donne and Yeats, on the other hand, it is not out of conjoined selves but ‘out of quarrel with ourselves that we create poetry.’ In Yeats’s ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’, for example, My Self and My Soul interact like two characters in internalized theatre, involving the reader both as a witness and a participant. In ‘The Reader over My Shoulder’, the dialogue of one between the earthly self and the proud spirit, the worldly distraction and the spiritual aspiration, the withholding reason and the liberating Rhyme, on the other hand, ends or seems to end on a note of an elusive finality: ‘Know me, have done: I am a proud spirit | And you for ever clay. Have done!’ Caught between the pulls of lowly clay and proud spirit, the reader-critic without and / or the critic ‘son of conscious brain’ within, ‘The Reader Over My Shoulder’ dramatizes the pulls of poetic inspiration and the need to give it a body in what Spenser called ‘this continual cruel civil war | The which myself against myself do make’ (*Amoretti*, XLIV). In being caught up from time to time in this inner civil war of conflicting selves – ‘the old enemy’ – thrusting yourself | Against me, as ambassador of myself’ – the poet is losing touch with his Muse; hence the search, even plea, for their conjoined, conjunctive status. My point is that the conjunction is of the sensual (*sunsum*) and the spiritual (*kra*), and this conjunction-mode is desired more consciously in non-Muse poems between rhyme / reason, critic-reader / poet, the Apollonian and Dionysian parts of the poet’s sensibility.

‘A Dream of Frances Speedwell’ effectively illustrates Graves’s threshold union of sensual and spiritual, real as in a dream or in ‘half-light’ so that the ‘you’ the poet meets at the party as well as the one who floats up ‘an unfamiliar staircase’ and ‘Posted beside the window in half-light’ | into someone’s bedroom’ is equally shadowy:

I fell in love at my first evening party.
You were tall and fair, just seventeen perhaps
Talking to my two sisters. I kept silent

And never since have loved a tall fair girl,
Until last night in the small windy hours
When, floating up an unfamiliar staircase
And into someone's bedroom, there I found her
Posted beside the window in half-light
Wearing that same white dress with lacy sleeves.
She beckoned. I came closer. We embraced
Inseparably until the dream faded.
Her eyes shone clear and blue

Who was it, though, impersonated you? (*Complete Poems*,
2003, p. 676)

As pointed out earlier, Graves maintains that 'royalty' and 'reality' are the same word – and it is the woman as goddess who entrances a poet, prompting him to celebrate her immortal attributes. Graves emphasises the agency of an ever-changing living Muse, a claim that Donne does not make: 'Love poems must be bounced off a moon. Moons vary. Love a different Muse-woman and you get a different poem.' In the same interview in 1969, Graves goes on to elaborate that:

the act of love is a metaphor of spiritual togetherness,
promiscuity seems forbidden to poets, though I do not grudge
it to any nonpoet. Familiarities like a lecherous and erotic
kiss you should reserve for those whom you really love.

Love poems commemorate 'secret occasions [...] Since poetry should not be confused with autobiography I refrain from marking large groups with names of the women who inspired or provoked them. It would lead only to mischief.' In 'Secrecy' keeping love sacred means keeping identities secret; it would be deceitful and destructive to 'make a him and her | Out of me and you':

Let pigeons couple
Brazenly on the bough,
But royal stag and hind

Are of our own mind. (*Complete Poems*, 2003, p. 541)

Donne, too, invokes his Muse in white robes, but by invoking Mahomet's Paradise he extends the metaphor to suggest the need to distinguish between a heaven's Angel in white robes and an evil spirit masquerading in white robes before entering 'this love's hallow'd temple' while urging her to disrobe, before going to bed:

In such white robes, heaven's Angels used to be
Revealed to men; thou, angel bring'st with thee
A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise; and though
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know,
By this these Angels from an evil sprite;
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.⁴⁷

In Donne, even though it is the poet's voice that evokes the scene, while he can also effectively ventriloquise for Sappho in 'Sappho to Phaleinis', the reader is involved both as a participant and witness as it were in a play. While the 'evil sprite' in white arouses fear, the Muse, the true Angel, in white sets 'our flesh upright,' given the wide-ranging imagery of exploration and intense courtship that involves both body and soul. In contrast, in 'Down, Wanton, Down!' Graves admonishes the erotic self to not raise its head just at 'the whisper of 'Love's name' but wait till 'many-gifted Beauty' is ready, for she 'requires | More delicacy from her squires'. Love may be blind, but it can distinguish between erotic desire and pure lust:

'Will many-gifted Beauty come
Bowing loyalty to your bald rule of thumb,
Or Love swear loyalty to your crown?'⁴⁸

For Donne, 'to enter in these bonds, is to be free; | Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.' It is a complete loyalty | commitment of body and soul in 'Full nakedness', *only* if the Muse with 'many-gifted Beauty' concurs. Donne evokes this interconnection of the body and the soul in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,' the

image of the compass suggests that the souls of the lovers are connected even when their bodies are apart:

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to aery thinness beat.⁴⁹

Two stanzas later, the body, missing the connection with the other, is evoked through sexual imagery when one of the hands of the compass is likened to a human penis:

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

VI

Donne's Muse, heaven's Angel in white, imagined descending 'in this love's hallow'd temple, this soft bed', even though silk is not mentioned, is both sensual and spiritual. In 'The Face in the Mirror', the queen in her high silk pavilion symbolizes the mythologised Moon-Goddess. Both weaving and silk are, traditionally, associated with the goddesses in mythology and with women's art. Homer, for example, mentions the supernatural quality of the weaving in the robes of goddesses. Silk is not an ascetic's garment, although it has served as a symbol of power and, exceptionally, of ecclesiastical authority as in the Byzantine, Ottonian and Salian realms,⁵⁰ since 'the fine linen is the righteousness of saints' (*Revelation* xix. 7, 8).

Annotating the multiple levels of symbolism in 'The Face in the Mirror' and the mythologized courtship of the queen in her high silk pavilion, Joseph points out both latent and more recognised sensual / sexual associations of the silk pavilion:

Just as butterfly wings are conventionally associated with the delicacy, lightness and capriciousness of the spirit, the visuality and tactility of butterfly wings are associated with labia; and the relationship of the hood of the tent with the hood over the clitoris. (Joseph, p. 143)

He goes on to add:

Graves helps this metaphor along by using the modifier 'silk', a word with pre-eminent haptic associations. *In 'high silk pavilion', delicacy of the soaring spirit is conjoined to sexuality or a nuance of sexuality, a union that we might trace in other clear-cut vaginal images in the poem, such as the poem's rhyme scheme. (my italics, ibid)*

The soaring spirit conjoined to sexuality is, indeed, what to my mind is embodied in Graves's love-ethic, as I have tried to show, operating in the domain of relative consciousness, *Bhavamukha*, where the sensual and the spiritual aspects of love for the Muse, the *kra* and the *sunsum* are perceived as 'poised in conjunction' as in twilight, as it were, the temperate zone of Graves's love poetry.

In the section, 'Her High Silk Pavilion', Joseph collates multiple symbolic uses of silk pavilion and pavilion *per se* including 'a valuable antecedent' in Blake's 'Milton, A Poem', in which the poet refers to the sky as 'an azure Tent with silken Veils', suggesting the temporal and heavenly dimensions. I would like to add 'The Silken Tent', by Robert Frost, written after the death of his wife Elinor in 1938 and inspired by and addressed to Kay Morrison, his manager, muse, and mistress for the last twenty-five years of his life. The relationship between the poet and the poem is one of a steadfast devotion to the mysteries of the creative process and consequently to its innate capriciousness also. Frost does not mythologize either the Muse or the source of her capriciousness. However, 'The Silken Tent' comes closest to being Frost's invocation of the Muse, unnamed, mysterious and independent presence through imagery that is simultaneously sensual and spiritual:

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
[...]
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought.⁵¹

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⁴⁶ Carol Rumens, 'Poem of the Week: "The Cool Web"', by Robert Graves, *The Guardian*, 18 December 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/dec/18/poem-of-the-week-the-cool-web-by-robert-graves>> [accessed 4 August 2024]

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⁴⁸ 'Down, Wanton, Down!' in *Complete Poems*, 2000, pp. 338-39.

⁴⁹ John Donne, 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' in *Poems* <https://archive.org/details/poemsofjohndonne01donna_2/page/50/mode/2up> [accessed 4 August 2024]

⁵⁰ Stephen Wagner, 'The Impact of Silk in the Middle Ages', *Textile Society of America*, 14 September 2016

The Robert Graves Review

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⁵¹ Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York, Library of America, 1995), p. 302.