Seán Haldane

This Thing: Robert Graves and the Goddess

> All saints revile her, and all sober men
> Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean—
> In scorn of which I sailed to find her
> In distant regions likeliest to hold her
> Whom I desired above all things to know,
> Sister of the mirage and echo…

Robert graves stated that 'the test of a poet's vision … is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and the island over which she rules', and that 'he must address only the Muse… and tell her the truth about himself and her.' His poem 'The White Goddess', written in middle age—in the first person, as above: the 'I' was later revised to 'we'—is by his own standards definitive. But 'He can't mean it' was the most heard comment on his lectures when he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford in the early 1960s—mainly from students reading English and well stuck in what he anachronistically described as 'Apollo's golden mean'. But his lectures were always packed, and in the main by students from other disciplines than literature: scientists often took him seriously—as did the faculty of MIT in 1963 when after due acknowledgment that 'true originality implies a leap taken by the mind across a dark gulf of nothingness into new regions of scientific thought', he explained that 'Symptoms of the trance in which poetic composition occurs differ greatly from those in an induced mediumistic trance; though both seem directed by an external power. In a poetic trance, which happens no more predictably than an epileptic fit, this power is traditionally identified with the ancient Muse-goddess.' For he did mean it, though his language of description could vary between the mythological and the straightforwardly puzzled and down to earth. When I first met him in 1961, I mentioned I had recently heard a reading on the bbc of one of his poems, 'Lion Lover', in which he describes 'gnawing bones in a dry lair' as well as 'your naked feet upon my scarred shoulders.' 'Read it very sexily, did he?' Graves asked. Then more seriously, 'It's bloody horrible. The awful thing is that you're in love with someone, even if you know she is completely heartless… There's this thing—call it the Goddess—always behaving absolutely bloodily. But you've got to . . .' He stopped. 'It gets worse and worse as you get older.'

Graves's reputation is now in flux. Since he died at the age of 90 in 1985, with dementia, this dementia is conjectured to have extended back to the years of his mad behaviour with young women he regarded as incarnations of the Muse. His frankness (he described *The White Goddess* as 'a crazy book') didn't help, nor did his obvious enjoyment of fame (being on the cover of *Life* magazine with a photo of him clambering in bathing trunks along a cliff face in Mallorca) during a period when media celebrity was being invented, nor did his being surrounded by various parasites and opportunists. Even Spike Milligan published a collection of not very coherent letters as *'Dear Robert, Dear Spike'*: the dust jacket describes them as 'fellow poets'. 'Am still Robert', he wrote rather desperately to an unappreciative poet friend James Reeves at the time. He did not believe he or anyone really changed. In 1961 he said, 'My personality has remained the same. . . That's the funny thing, even though externals change you stay the same person.' He also told me confidently, 'There is no time.'

Graves's most sympathetic and accurate biographer, Martin Seymour-Smith (1982, revised 1995), reads Graves's life more as a long poem than do Richard Perceval Graves (three volumes, 1986, 1990, 1995) and Miranda Seymour (1995) who read it as prose. But all three tend to judge his final years harshly, and to varying degrees all sign up to what can be called a 'received' view of Graves's life in which 'he can't be serious' about the Goddess. (Seymour-Smith signed up to a difference between inspired poetry and artificial verse, but not to the Muse.)

Graves's behaviour in his early old age caused distress to all who knew him, as well perhaps to his 'Muses.' A BBC television programme in the late 1990s without irony interviewed some of these, with the captions 'Judith Bledsoe, Muse', etc. Seymour-Smith wrote about him in the 1970s:

> Of all men living, who could be most wise
> Insists that women may put out men's eyes;
> Yet is himself protected from this ban
> On love without obedience: he can
> Inform the world that he's contented now
> In a supreme potency, and broadcast how
> He lives happy in a woman's grip—
> Ignorant he holds the hand that holds the whip….

Yet Graves took the poem in good part. Again there was the paradox of an apparent gap between his high flown and genuine belief in the Goddess, and his earthy recognition that 'the poetic faculty is atrophied in every edu-

cated person who does not privately struggle to cultivate it.' His Muses were, after all real women. How did each contribute to Graves's vision of the Goddess? How did 'this thing' manifest itself in them?

The first possible Muse is described in *Goodbye to All That* (1929) as 'Marjorie, a probationer nurse' at the hospital where Graves was recovering from almost fatal wounds in 1916. This was Marjorie Machin, then aged 18 or 19. Graves wrote about her to an officer friend, 'I am quite satisfied to find that I have the power of falling in love with a girl.' He stated in *Goodbye to All That* that he 'felt difficulty in adjusting [him]self to the experience of woman-love'. According to a later poem, 'A Dream of Frances Speedwell' he had fallen in love from a distance in his teens with a friend of his sister. He also experienced an idealistic and non-physical love for such male friends as a fellow-officer who had been killed:

> Walking through the trees to cool my heat and pain,
> I know that David's here with me again.
> All that is simple, happy, strong he is…

Graves had to, as he saw it, reject Marjorie Machin because she was corresponding with another officer at the front and he had seen what happened when such men received rejections from girl friends. This episode does not fit in with a pseudo-Freudian myth of Graves's smooth transfer of sexuality from public school boys and fellow officers to his 'boyish' first wife Nancy Nicholson, and was at first denied by all three biographers. But letters from Graves about Marjorie turned up in 1995 proving them wrong.

It is assumed that Graves wrote his first love poems to Nancy, which appeared in his volumes *The Treasure Box* (1919) and *Country Sentiment* (1920). But I wonder if Marjorie appears in 'Marigolds' ('marigold' and 'Marjorie' are etymologically related) in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917):

> New beginnings and new shoots
> Spring again from hidden roots.
> Pull or stab or cut or burn,
> Love must ever yet return.

In the received view, Nancy was an early feminist but a scatterbrained nitwit whose inconsistency prevented Graves from resolving his war neurosis. His life with her, this view went, was at first a pastoral and domestic

escape, but she was not his intellectual equal, and after a series of friendships with guru-like men (T.E. Lawrence and a Nepalese philosopher, Basanta Malik) he found himself more than ready for the arrival of the brilliant American poet Laura Riding.

Much is made in the biographies of the fact that when Graves first met Nancy she was wearing trousers. Well, she was aged 17 at the time, and she was doing war work on a farm. But her main ambition was to have four children soon, which she did. She came from a family of painters (her father William Nicholson and her brother Ben). She had been born at Chaucer's cottage in Woodstock. She can hardly have been dim: there was a meeting of minds between her and the not unintelligent Graves. 'Nancy and I called ourselves socialists', Graves remarks in *Goodbye to All That*. They also shared feminist ideas (they gave their sons the surname Graves, the daughters Nicholson—an unusual and courageous decision) as well as a determination to live a pastoral life in the country, a tendency to take off on impulsive holidays and treks and to live beyond their means, and an absolute outspokenness and absence of class bias in their dealings with all and sundry. They set up a country grocers shop together—though it failed. She illustrated his poems and nursery rhymes for children, and worked, when she could, on her own painting. In photographs she is apple-cheeked, gangly, unaffected—an original. And wearing a dress. His poems to her—or 'through' her as the Elizabethans would have said—convey her as poignant, lovely, suffering, intense and real, never ideal. Graves never suppressed these poems, as he did those from the War: he did not see them as an 'escape'. He is supposed, in cliché, to have escaped the horrors of war with Nancy. He just fell in love with her.

Are you shaken, are you stirred
  By a whisper of love?
Spellbound to a word
  Does time cease to move,
Till her calm grey eye
  Expands to a sky
And the clouds of her hair
  Like storms go by?

But already in his earliest poems through Nancy, Graves is suffering from her anger at him:

One smile relieves
A heart that grieves
Though deadly sad it be,
And one hard look
Can close the book
That lovers love to see.

Their tragedy was that they were naïve. They thought that Robert could write poems and Nancy could paint, and they could have four children, and remain themselves. They were dirt poor and became dependent on increasingly angry families (emotionally blackmailing in the case of the Graves parents). None of Graves's books before 1929, when he was 34, sold well. Nancy may have had an affair with one of his best friends.

Then in 1926 Laura Riding arrived to live with them. They had both written to her, in America, when they came across her poems. Frances Wilson in her fascinating *Literary Seductions* has dissected famous literary relationships—Henry Miller and Anais Nin, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Graves and Riding—which were invented in their participants' minds before they even began. Graves had already fallen in love with Riding in her poem, 'The Quids', about 'slippery monads', published in John Crowe Ransom's magazine *The Fugitive*. He and Nancy (who had also liked the poem) invited her to join them. When he met her at the boat train in London he was momentarily horrified by her over made-up appearance, but in another train, to Oxford, he saw a light about her head. As 'a Trinity' all three decided to live in a ménage à trois (here as idealistically as Shelley, whom Graves never liked, with whom the experiment was equally disastrous and fatal). God knows how this will be treated in a film due for release in 2012 about the Robert, Nancy, Laura triangle, to be titled *The Laureate*.

The First World War poet Graves admired and was influenced by most was Isaac Rosenberg—who wrote a powerful poem 'The Female God.' Rosenberg is sidelined, for some reason, in the modern revival of the Great War Poets—as Graves largely is: his war poems do not fit the bill any more than Rosenberg's—or for that matter Charles Hamilton Sorley's. They are not war poems, just poems. (The War poet of the sentimental academic / popular cult is *only* a war poet and preferably a pacifist: after the war he is either literally dead, like Owen, or poetically so, like Sassoon.)

Graves was more than ready to make Laura into the Semitic Female God prophesied by Rosenberg in his adumbrations from the Lilith of the Old Testament Apocrypha. He had already discovered the White Goddess / Muse

in the years with Nancy, first in his enthusiasm for Skelton who had the name of the Muse Calliope embroidered on his robe, then in his biblical study, along Rosenberg lines, *My Head! My Head!* He was also influenced by the great psychologist William Rivers who treated 'shell-shocked' soldiers (as in the film *Regeneration*) and whose book *Instinct and Behaviour* is an under-read classic. Rivers alerted Graves to the cult of the Great Mother in some tribal societies, and to Malinowski's field research among the Trobrianders of the Pacific who existed without patriarchy (though not with matriarchy either).

Riding exerted a powerful magic over Graves and others—not least through her poignant and truthful early poems, and in her erotic presence in which he merged, perhaps for the first time, love and thought:

> To speak of the hollow nape where the close chaplet
> Of thought is bound, the loose-ends lying neat
> In two strands downward, where the shoulders open
> Casual and strong below, waiting their burden,
> And the long spine begins its downward journey:
> The hair curtains this postern silkily,
> This secret stairway by which thought will come....

She stimulated thought in him, but it is a mistake to claim, in the received view, that she originated any of his ideas. Not only was the Goddess already present in his mind, he had already come to the view that 'there is no time'. Riding's famous view that time has stopped was first expressed in the 1930s, though it may have derived earlier from Leibnitz who thought time was merely the relation among 'monads' (the 'quids'). But Graves had already asked 'Does time cease to move?' in that early poem to Nancy. He had already written a book on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and he, and presumably Riding, read J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927) which concludes that dreams consist of images about a third each from the past, present, and future. Dunne's findings were replicated in a series of meticulous experiments by Krippner and Ullman in New York, 1966–1969. Intellectuals in the late 1920s were preoccupied with notions of time. Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man*, 1927, describes this as a 'time cult'. And quantum physics was getting underway. In his history of the period (with Alan Hodge), *The Long Weekend*, Graves referred to 'time's ineluctable wibble-wobble'. In *The White Goddess* he declared his faith in 'more-than-coincidence.' Riding had not started this train of thought in Graves, but she exemplified it:

If strange things happen where she is,
So that men say that graves open
And the dead walk, or that futurity
Becomes a womb and the unborn are shed,
Such portents are not to be wondered at,
Being tourbillions in Time made
By the strong pulling of her bladed mind
Through that ever-reluctant element.

Riding's bladed mind did open Graves up. When the dust settled after her famous suicide leap from a fourth floor window—as she later said, 'It was the shortest way out of the room' where she, Graves, Nancy, and an Anglo-Irishman called Phibbs whom Riding wished to coopt into a new 'Four' had been arguing—Graves and she went to Mallorca. Nancy lived for many years with Phibbs. Although named 'the Devil' by Riding, with Graves's acquiescence Phibbs was a good father substitute to the children.

'The Fall' broke Riding's pelvis and back, left her partly crippled, and provided her with a reason for an abrupt change. As Joyce Wexler remarks, 'She treated her fall as an act of will that had allowed her to shed her personal identity and enter a universal state of being', and she would speak of having died—a leaf, surely, out of Graves's book: he had 'died' in 1916 when wounded by a shell fragment, set aside for dead, and having his obituary published in *The Times* which later had to rescind it.

She announced that 'bodies have had their day', and she put this into practice. She had already written an essay about sex, 'The Damned Thing.' When she and Graves moved to Mallorca (following a tip by Gertrude Stein: 'it's Paradise, if you can stand it') they were occasional lovers, but she had stopped this by 1933. Or not technically: she would let him come into her bedroom to comfort her during thunderstorms, and she would 'relieve' him from time to time—if he was 'good'; an effective process known to behaviourists as intermittent reinforcement.

A paradox is that this man who did not believe in time made his living writing the best *historical* novels of the 20th century. Although of course he offhandedly rejected history, agreeing with Laura Riding that 'Geography is about maps, history about chaps.' He let some of his feelings through in *I Claudius* (which Riding dismissed as a pot-boiler though they lived off its proceeds: she literally tore to shreds a pile of favourable reviews) where a source of evil is Augustus's wife LIVIA—perhaps by more-than-coinci-

dence containing 3 of the same letters, given the Latin equivalence of V and U, as LAURA.

After the 'Fall' Riding's poems were never the same: they lacked feeling. I suspect she had suffered brain damage. Even without direct impact to the head, in an impact severe enough to break so many bones the brain is shaken about, the frontal lobes being particularly vulnerable. A common 'frontal' effect is a certain disconnection between thought and feeling (although it may remit with time). As if in conformity with Riding, it became difficult for Graves to admit feeling to his poems. Although the received version is that Riding inspired Graves to his best poetry, and he did dutifully write a poem to her as 'The Sovereign Muse', his poems of the 1930s are mainly dry records of depression:

> Trudge, body, and climb, trudge and climb,
> But not to stand again on any peak of time:
> Trudge, body.....
>
> Before each sun may rise, you salute it for set:
> Trudge, body.

Riding occasionally set him up with passing women so that he could gratify what she saw as his brutish urges, but sent them packing if he showed any signs of attachment—more intermittent reinforcement.

Riding's role, psychologically, in Graves's life was less to inspire him than to punish him. He later remarked to Seymour-Smith 'I treated Nancy badly and my punishment was Laura.' Riding was more like his mother Amahlia Ranke—originally German speaking even, puritanical, righteous—than any other woman in his life. And since, after all, a man doesn't usually sleep with his mother, the eventually celibate partnership was appropriate.

In its early days, when they loved each other, before the Fall, their relationship was good for each other's work. Graves much valued and frequently quoted Riding's phrase (in a poem to him): 'Forgive me, giver, if I destroy the gift: it is so nearly what would please me. I cannot but perfect it.' Poet-critic couples can be productive—I'm thinking of the Catalan poet and painter Narcis Comadira whose wife Dolors Oller is a literary critic—but Riding's view was particularly harsh: 'the female mind is the judge, and the male mind the subject of judgment... But the male mind has now had all the time there is for working up case.' She also wrote that 'criticism is death.' She certainly didn't accept it for herself.

There is no space here to discuss the famous break up between Graves and Riding. 'She ran off with a man called Schuyler', Graves summarised to me at Oxford while warmly recommending I read her poems. Events in New Hope, Pennsylvania in 1939, when Riding famously announced after her decade of celibacy 'Schuyler and I do', were more complex. Miranda Seymour has even written a novel about this drama, *The Telling*. Riding had embraced time literally in the person of Schuyler Jackson, a charming mediocrity of whom she expected great things: he had reviewed her poetry favourably in *Time* (yes, time) magazine, calling her collection 'the book of books of the mid-twentieth century.' But she 'renounced' poetry (which had dried up anyway) in favour of work on *An Exact Dictionary of Meanings*—originally to have been assisted by Graves, but transposed into a collaboration with Jackson. This turns out (it was published in 1997, six years after her death) to reveal the late Riding as an Aristotelian essentialist of the most banal sort: words are 'precious essences of human perception' and language is 'the essential moral meeting ground'—whereas in her early days it was 'a form of laziness.'

The first act of the New Hope drama had in fact been played out in Brittany earlier that year. While Riding and Jackson were gearing up (à la *Literary Seductions*) by transatlantic correspondence for their future union, Graves started a relationship with Beryl, wife of his friend Alan Hodge. His poetry suddenly came to a new life:

> Lovers in the act dispense
> With such meum-tuum sense
> As might warningly reveal
> What they must not pick or steal,
> And their nostrum is to say:
> 'I and you are both away.'
>
> After, when they disentwine
> You from me and yours from mine....

'The Thieves' resonates with a four way theft: on the surface each lover steals the other, but in the light of the history each is stealing the other from another—Hodge and Riding. I wonder how much Riding's fury at this drove her to 'do' with Jackson? At any rate her fury with Graves endured. As late as 1983 she wrote in a letter to *The London Review of Books* that 'Graves was, in his basic instincts, a lout.'

In the received view Beryl is the subject of many of Graves's most tender love poems, but was basically 'ordinary', a relief from the exacting Riding, and a domestic wife and mother ('splendid Beryl!') who meekly accepted Graves's establishment of the doctrine that the Muse is 'the perpetual other woman' and stood by while he fell in love with a series of young bimbo Muses. She has received a bad press from some of Graves's so called friends. (Similarly, Sassoon had disparaged Nancy). The American journalist and editor of *Time* Tom Matthews described Beryl, who was strikingly good-looking, as looking like a drowned cat, and trying to 'be like Laura' in berating Graves, before she found her real vocation as a wife and mother. James Reeves as he deteriorated in late middle age used to rail on about how Beryl 'was waiting for Robert at the boat'; in fact, he returned from America before she did.The two of Graves's poet friends who at their best could match his level in poetry, Norman Cameron and Martin Seymour-Smith, liked her. Seymour-Smith's account of the Graves-Beryl relationship is attentive and balanced: he thought Graves's poems to Beryl his best because 'to a real woman':

> Now that I love you, now that I recall
> All scattered elements of will that swooped
> By night as jealous dreams through windows
> To circle above the beds like bats,
> Or as dawn-birds flew blindly at the panes
> In curiosity rattling out their brains—
>
> Now that I love you, as not before,
> Now you can be and say, as not before:
> The mind clears and the heart true-mirrors you
> Where at my side an early watch you keep
> And all self-bruising heads loll into sleep.

Beryl could 'be and say', all right. She remarked to my wife and me in her old age, 'I don't like myths very much: they're usually dead. Though of course, as Robert would say, they can also be alive. The myth of Money, for instance.' This is real talk—and what Graves liked in those close to him. He wrote in another poem of their 'honest first reluctance to agree', though others 'may flatter me with absolute agreement.'

In 1948 Graves published *The White Goddess*—the first of a series of controversial books including *Greek Myths* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* in

which he offered a Goddess-centred interpretation of myth and religion. Seymour-Smith, having read widely in the anthropology of the early twentieth century shows scepticism about this interpretation. But more recent work by the archaeologist Maria Gimbutas on the goddess-centred religion of 'Old Europe' supports it. In areas where I have some knowledge, for example in Irish literature and tree lore, Graves is invariably accurate, although some of his archaeological evidence at second hand is not. He is as ever down to earth, simultaneously old-fashioned and up to date:

> The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites. But 'nowadays'? Function and use remain the same: only the application has changed. This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family.

There were four later 'Muses'. The first was Judith Bledsoe who was aged 17 in 1950 when she first arrived in Mallorca and fulfilled, uncannily as Graves saw it, the role of the Goddess. Graves was then 55 and Beryl 35. Judith was beautiful, a not incapable painter, and became friends with Beryl. However, Graves took a fussy and proprietary interest in her love affairs, and suffered genuinely at her inevitable betrayal of his expectations when she became engaged to a man memorably described in Graves's poem 'The Bluefly'. His poems 'through' Judith are sometimes formulaic. A few are among his best. 'The Window Sill' ends as, apparently, their love did:

> Julia, leaning on her window sill.
> 'I love you still,'
> She said, 'O love me still!'
>
> I answered: 'Julia, do you love me best?'
> 'What of this breast,'
> She mourned, 'this flowery breast?'

Then a wild sobbing spread from door to door,
And every floor
Cried shame on every floor,

As she unlaced her bosom to disclose
Each breast a rose,
A white and cankered rose.

After a gap of several years (during which the Graves's last child was born), the second Muse, Margot Callas, appeared in 1959. Perhaps this would have been another 'miraculous, unpredictable and unassessable event in non-history' (as he later defined poems to Seymour-Smith): Graves did not want to have a 'vulgar' affair with any of his Muses. He did want to be free to record, as a poet, along the lines he had set out in *The White Goddess*, the truth about any woman he loved. He did fall in love with each of the four Muses. And why not? So far as is known, Beryl did not object: indeed she left Graves to follow his own judgment—which was all right insofar as this judgment remained intact. And he always lived his life openly: it would be hard to imagine him having a secret mistress. There does, however, seem to have been a disturbance of the sexual relationship between Graves and Beryl in the late 1950s.

The complicating factor was not so much Margot herself (she too remained friends with Beryl) as the involvement of a 'rival' in the form of Alastair Reid, a Scot who made his living as a teacher of poetry in an expensive U.S. junior college for young women, as a translator from poets in Spanish, and as a writer of articles for *The New Yorker*. He turned up in Mallorca (by then a lot of people were turning up) and after a period of study of Graves from a distance moved in to become his bosom friend. They even became blood brothers by mixing bloods from cut fingers. How the author of *The White Goddess* became close friends with the author of a volume of verse called *Oddments, Inklings, Omens, Moments* is a mystery. And Graves's dogged insistence on being himself (whatever that turned out to be) was at odds with Reid's eventual view that we consist of various 'separate selves.' But Graves seems to have needed a male friend in Mallorca: his old friends Matthews, James Reeves and Seymour-Smith could seldom visit, and Norman Cameron had died.

Reid and Margot inevitably ran off together. Just as inevitably, they soon separated. Reid was diabolised by Graves, rather as Phibbs had been by Riding in 1928. He became part of *The White Goddess* triangle formula into

which many of Graves's poems to Margot were beginning to fit: Goddess as lover and betrayer, faithful poet, and diabolical rival.

Apparently Graves was worried after his prostate operation of 1959 that he might be impotent, and Margot seems to have fixed this. (It is reported, though, that their relationship was 'only occasionally physical'.) The 'bloody horrible' poem 'Lion Lover' is about her, as is 'The Death Grapple':

> 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.

'There's always masochism in love', Graves remarked to me around that time, at Oxford. Unfortunately the next Muse put this to the test in a less lovely way. This was Cindy Lee, aka Aemilia Laraçuen, aka finally Emilia MacKinley, but generally known as Cindy. With her it was certainly physical, as she revealed in a kiss-and-tell article for *The Sunday Times* in 2006. And for once Graves seems out of his depth, his language inadequate to what he is living, as in 'The Blow.'

> You struck me on the face and I, who strike
> Only to kill, stood in confusion like
> Death's fool. Your ugly blow
> Had fallen soft as snow.
>
> Love me for what I am, with liberty
> To curb my rage; I love you for what will be—
> Your urgent sun—
> Therefore acquitting you of error.
>
> Laughter becomes us: gift of the third eye
> That passes nothing by.

The first two stanzas are more than up to the event, especially the old soldier's acknowledgment 'I who strike / Only to kill', then the final couplet becomes almost a nostrum—a way out. Still, Graves achieved a total clarity in some of his poems to Cindy:

> 'This year she has changed greatly'—meaning you—
> My sanguine friends agree,
> And hope thereby to reassure me.
>
> No, child, you never change; neither do I.
> Indeed all our lives long
> We are still fated to do wrong...

Graves's experiencing with Cindy what he referred to as 'the blood sports of desire' and his pouring out of money to her did make Beryl suffer. According to William Graves she used to sit silently for long periods holding her head. Later, more cheerfully, she described Cindy as 'the only disaster Muse'. Graves might actually have left Mallorca, and stayed in Mexico where at one point he followed Cindy, but luckily for him she ran off one time too many with another man, the beat 'poet' Howard Hart, and he returned home a more or less shattered man. But was Graves really 'the hand that holds the whip'? The various Muses were surely just being themselves. Seymour-Smith wrote that 'the essential cruelty of women is not really a good lesson for a poet to teach' and that Graves 'turned into a bigot who assumed that women were cruel in their essence—just because (or so it seemed) a notoriously self-regarding woman [Riding] had been cruel to him.' But Seymour-Smith himself wrote the alarming poem sequence 'Reminiscences of Norma' about the incidental cruelty of a woman's part-indifference. (Graves commiserated with him about it.) Perhaps women, at least when not constrained or bullied by a patriarchal society, are cruel to men in their inevitable disappointment in them. And the war between the sexes goes back a long way. Think of Catullus: 'Odi et amo. Et excrucior'—roughly translatable as: 'I hate and I love. And it hurts like hell...'

Besides which, leaving aside the more programmatic aspects of the White Goddess's—or indeed nature's—cruelty, Graves's poems, as much as Seymour-Smith's, are often about tenderness and gratitude to women.

After Cindy the pieces were picked up, essentially, by Beryl. Graves eventually recovered his sense of humour and wrote a poem about how some of his friends 'plucked him like a fowl.'

Then the last Muse turned up in the person of Juli Simons (now Julia Simonne) the daughter of old friends, who in 1966 at the age of 17 visited him in a London hospital and told him she had fallen in love with him. According to Seymour-Smith 'everyone gave a huge sigh of relief when she came along.'

Although Seymour-Smith's view that 'he holds the hand that holds the whip' underestimates the character of the various 'Muses', Graves's late poems can be formulaic. As Seymour-Smith puts it, he was 'dutiful to the course of his love as prescribed by his own theories'. But still miraculous poems occur. Here is a short one from 1967 when he was aged 72, 'Green Flash':

> Watch now for a green flash, for the last moment
> When the sun plunges into sea;
> And breathe no wish (most wishes are of weakness)
> When green, Love's own heraldic tincture,
> Leads in the mystagogues of Mother Night:
> Owls, planets, dark oracular dreams.
> Nightfall is not mere failure of daylight.

Graves suffered from mild cognitive impairment, not dementia, starting around 1970—not earlier. He had become muddled on the BBC TV progamme *The Brains Trust* in 1960 or so, and around the same time the journalist Philip Toynbee maliciously described him as 'in his anecdotage'. But at least since 1918 he had been capable of what he called 'sudden abstraction' in the form of absent mindedness and even occasional aphasia: he wrote in a poem about his 'unfinished sentences.' Until 1974 or so his letters were as always, and his poems were lucid. Eventually he developed dementia. This has been diagnosed, gratuitously, by Spike Milligan and Dr Anthony Clare, who is not known to have met or treated him, as Alzheimer's Disease. But his early cognitive impairment was almost certainly not Alzheimer's; if it was, it was one of the longest cases on record since Alzheimer's lasts five to fifteen years from its first signs and he did not die until 1985; further, unlike Alzheimer's it was characterised by lapses in concentration, not in memory. Furthermore, in the 'petrified self' (as the neuropsychologist Robin Morris terms it) of Alzheimer's there is limited capacity for insight ('My memory's fine'), whereas in the 1970s Graves was agonised by awareness of failing memory.

Most likely his eventual dementia was 'mixed'—the cumulative result of episodes of anoxia—severe loss of blood and near-death when wounded in 1916; a fall downstairs when recovering from his wounds, in which he

lacerated his head; a botched nose operation in 1917; a history of boxing at school and of possible head injury (broken nose) playing rugby; a probable concussion from his jump from a third floor window in 1928 (he was unconscious and twitching when Phibbs arrived on the scene); the necessity for scores of blood transfusions after the prostate operation in 1959 which revealed he lacked a blood clotting factor; a serious nose operation in 1971 which required unusually heavy doses of anaesthetic and after which he complained of memory loss; a sinus operation in 1972; an unspecified head injury in a car crash in Mexico which nonetheless made him ill for weeks; and finally the kind of decay associated with Alzheimer's Disease. Graves was a warrior. According to Seymour-Smith (in conversation) even in Graves's middle age if he took off his shirt to do gardening, his 1916 wound scar could be seen to ooze.

In his last years he agonised about having killed Germans, got into a fight with a German in Deia and began speaking German as he had in summers as a child. He wandered restlessly and got lost. He told an old friend, Honor Wyatt: 'I am in hell.' He stopped speaking after 1980. His death and funeral are lovingly described in the memoirs of William and Lucia Graves.

'Strange things happen where she is', Graves wrote of Laura Riding. Possibly strange things happen where *anyone* is, but Graves chose to notice them with his Muses. As Hardy wrote of himself: 'He was one who noticed such things.' As Seymour-Smith has pointed out, the character of the woman who inspires a male poet comes across in the poems. Graves trusted Julia Simonne:

> With you for mast and sail and flag,
> And anchor never known to drag,
> Death's narrow but oppressive sea
> Looks not unnavigable to me.

He wrote far too many poems to her, as she generously acknowledged in a 2007 article for the journal *Gravesiana*, pointing out that he ran out of time to subject his late poems to the pruning he had made of earlier ones. Most of them show a loss of intensity and a weakening of his rhythm towards prose. But they are often surprisingly thoughtful. Simonne's presence (or absence: they were usually apart) allowed the aging and often rambling Graves to explore his wilder ideas about magic, the fourth dimension—time—and the 'fifth dimensional' events that transcend it. In her article she quotes a letter he wrote to her on the 20th of April, 1970:

> I am the expression of a combination of genes, which I chose myself. Reincarnation…would mean a different set of genes and inherited memories. If I am then asked, 'Then at what time did you take these decisions about yourself?' I answer 'Time is a convenience, not a fixed irreversible flow, which man is capable of disregarding (in the sense of fixed fated occurrence)…. From the point of distant stars, I will not be born for millions of light-years; but I have my fixed place in the universe and this can never be altered. If therefore I am asked, 'When did you decide on your birth?' I answer: 'In the moment of death, when alone I have a full conspectus of my life, which is a sort of capsule containing an endless circle, head swallowing tail.

Crazy stuff! Must be dementia! But this harks back to his experience of near-death in 1916 and to his ideas on time in the 1920s. He had written a brilliant though hostile essay on Nietzsche in 1935, and he is here referring to Nietzsche's theory of 'eternal recurrence' and 'amor fatis', namely that we live exactly the same lives again and again and wisdom consists of loving our fate—i.e. our eternal recurrence. Graves is also referring to the neo-Platonic image of eternity, the 'dracon ouroboros'—the serpent eating its own tail. And he is anticipating a cosmological theory of the 21st century: that time does not exist. In *The End of Time* (1999) the theoretical physicist Julian Barbour sets this theory out, and currently he and his research group are working on the mathematics of a minimalist universe of space in which time is not necessary. Barbour's theory of why we *experience* time is that the universe contains 'time capsules', defined as 'any fixed pattern that creates or encodes the appearance of motion, change or history.' And 'the mature brain is a time capsule. History resides in its structure.'

By more-than-coincidence, Barbour's father Neville was a school friend of Graves. But I know from Barbour that he is not aware of Graves's (or Riding's) view of time, and certainly not of Graves's definition of 'a sort of capsule containing an endless circle'—and of course Barbour's matching view post-dates 1970 so Graves could not have known it.

John Donne described his first meeting of his Muse Ann More as a 'strange and fatal interview.' Graves's fate (like that of many poets in a very long tradition) was revealed to him by those women he saw as possessed by the Muse, or the Goddess, around whom the events of more-than-coincidence occurred—culminating spontaneously in poems. His poems are no more under his own control than Fate—who in mythology is above all gods

and goddesses in a timeless universe. Poems are born of Chance and Necessity (to use the physicist Jacques Monod's equivalent to fate). 'This thing' is both inspiration and what it records. Poems are one offs, 'miraculous events in non-history', whereas physics is a deliberate research programme which requires replicability. But both physics and poetry reveal that the universe is a stranger place than common sense allows. 'He can't mean it.' Oh yes he can.