

Mythologising the Hand: Graves's Sensuous Mode

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In *The White Goddess*, Graves describes, among other things, ‘the diagram of the hand used as a signalling keyboard by the Druids’ to ‘understand the puzzling traditional names of the four fingers – “fore-finger”, “fool’s-finger”, “leech, or physic-finger” and “auricular or ear-finger” – in terms of the mythic value of the letters contained on them’.¹ He goes on to suggest a relationship between the finger-tips and the art of composing verse, and citing his personal experience he remarks: ‘It is less likely that a mnemonic trick involving the use of the finger alphabet was used than the poets induced a poetic trance by treating their fingertips as oracular agents’ (pp. 193–94). Graves then reports how, impelled by his own itching fingers-tips, he began to reconstruct the seven stanzas of *Dichetal do Chennaib*, the original Druidic incantation which invokes the five twigs, the true divining trees to ‘discover’ what the poet, ‘drumming on his brow’, is waiting for.

While it is not known how often Graves actually followed the supposed oracular agency of his finger-tips in his poetic engagement with the Goddess, certainly this perception or ‘myth’ of the symbolic value of the hands and by implication of the tactile sensuous mode seems to have extended to his life or vice versa. That explains why Graves dwells on this particular rite about the poet being able to divine the poem before writing it, and acknowledges in passing the other two divinatory rites of the Druids.²

This article attempts to show that mythologising of the hands and the related sensitivity to touch and to body impressions is integral to Graves’s view of the nature of poetry. This proclivity is also the basis for Graves’s special affinity to Keats among the English Romantic poets. Graves speaks approvingly of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ as Keats’s vision of the White Goddess. The female

figure revealed in the poem becomes symbolically the archetypal Mother who enacts 'Creations and destroyings, all at once'³ in Keats's exploration of the poet-Muse paradigm, especially in 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion'. In 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' the imagery is particularly striking for its lingering tactility: 'a lily on thy brow / with anguish moist and fever-dew' / And on thy cheeks a fading rose', 'a garland for her head, / And bracelets too, and fragrant zone', 'I shut her wild, wild eyes / With kisses four', and finally 'the cold hill's side' when the dream-like visitation of 'la belle dame sans merci' ends. It is important to remember here that the test of a Muse poem for Graves was its 'dagger-keen' effect on the reader and a sensation analogous to the one suggested by Keats's famous remark: 'Everything [...] that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.'

Far from being a literary idiosyncrasy, Graves's mythologising of the tactile sensuous mode is consistent with his larger world view, which rejects the mechanising influence of a mechanised civilisation. Indeed, the poet-Muse paradigm as developed in *The White Goddess* is a spirited critique of what he called 'mechanarchy', as well as an impassioned invitation to rediscover the repository of the primal roots of poetry in the world of rock, hill and trees, a world which is essentially one of making with hands and not with machines. Inspired as it is by the archetypal mode of invocation as evocation, Graves's Muse poem is by definition handwritten and therefore handmade. Extending the mythical value of the hands further and citing Irish and Welsh bards, Graves even maintained that he wrote Muse poetry with his right hand and satire and prose with his left hand.

For Graves, the poet-Muse paradigm is more specifically rooted in what he conceives as 'a deep-seated belief in miracle'. This belief seems to have been confirmed for him during his fighting in France in the War. A minute or two before he fell down and fainted after he was hit by a shell, and 'was dead, an hour or more', Graves noted that he had two very small wounds on his left hand and that they were in exactly the same position as the two on his right hand that he had got during the preliminary bombardment

at Loos. 'This I had taken', he announces, 'as a sign that I would come through all right.'⁴

For 'the second-fated poet', as Graves saw himself from then on, such signs are to be taken for wonders. A poem itself is a sign or an act of recording a sign. This may manifest itself as 'a cold shudder', the night wind piercing the poet like a spear, or 'soft, steady, even, copious rain that harms no leaf nor flower', 'a handclasp' or a touch of the Muse's 'watchful' fingers.⁵ Put another way, 'Love's full glory' 'jewels' her 'fingers immemorally'. 'Touch my shut lips', pleads the poet, 'with your soft forefinger, / Not for silence, but speech – ' (p. 515). In the time of waiting for the Muse's touch during idle intervals of near drought, his sound senses counsel his hands to be patient, letting his 'nerveless fingers dabble in the shallows' until the Moon Goddess has need of them ('A Time of Waiting', p. 255). When she reveals her need the poetic speech does happen, and the poet's instinct is to 'hold fast, with both hands, to that royal love' because it 'alone restores fragmentation into true being'. Thus where the poem is, is the moving hand.

The Muse's visitation or the touch of her hand is the moment of prophecy and poetic speech for it awakens the other senses, even sight. In 'Gift of Sight' (p. 302), though the poet has known 'the diverse tastes of the wood', 'the smells of bird's breath and of bat's wing',

Yet sight I lacked: until you stole upon me,
Touching my eyelids with light finger-tips.
The trees blazed out, their colours whirled together,
Nor ever before had I been aware of sky.

For Graves, a poem is not a visual picture but a sensuous movement towards apprehending the most meaningful moment especially through touch. His recurrent peripatetic imagery of tread seems related more to a dynamic use of hands and feet than to a sense of motion in the Shelleyan sense. Walking on rocky hills, on sand-hills, on crooked paths is, arguably, a way of

anchoring, metaphorically, the necessary trance of poetry to a tactile sense of the physical world. About his mode of walking, Graves remarks: 'I see only with a fixed focus. (In walking, I always tend to swerve to the right of my indicated course: thus I choose to walk on the left side of a person so that his proximity keeps me from straying.)'

Does this visual peculiarity, and seeing best in 'half-light' like Keats, as Graves maintained, also partially explain a lack of particularity of colours in Graves's poetry? Colour is simply stated in Graves: 'a cascade of unendurable colour' ('Ecstasy of Chaos'), 'a wake of multicoloured bubbles' ('What did You Say?'), 'dizzying us with paraboles of colour' ('The Near Eclipse'), and 'what brave colours gallantry might flaunt' ('Bird of Paradise'). In comparison, Wallace Stevens, to take an extreme example, evokes colours through a wide range of their association and tone⁶. Yeats's 'No Second Troy' comprises a series of four rhetorical questions anchored in analogies like 'a mind that nobleness made simple as a fire'. The concluding question 'Was there another Troy for her to burn?' conjuring up a visual image brings the poem to a dramatic closure. In 'Daffodils', Wordsworth mentions 'golden' only once but he so manipulates the associated imagery of movement, dance, and light ('sparkling waves in glee' and 'the stars that shine and twinkle on the milk way') that the image of golden daffodils continues to linger in the inward eye of the reader.

To take a specific example, green is the colour of fear, as Graves reminds us in a line from an early poem: 'Green terror ripples through our bones'. More frequently, Graves's green and its variables⁷ are also the colour of mystery and magic and are associated with moments of certitude; yet they are stated rather than evoked. In 'The Green Castle', it is not the greenness of the seventh heaven into which the lovers enter 'by a trance of love' that evokes the defining moment when Adam is 'wrapped' by Eve in her arms. It is rather the sense of the castle being 'girdled with ramparts of blue sea' and the waves leisurely washing and breaking its silence, as well as the lingering 'afterglow of truth'

that the flushed lovers carry when they fall earthward (p. 278). The moment when 'Adam is wrapped by Eve in her arms' is not just that of 'dumb enchantment'⁸ or 'self-possession': it is the moment of the birth of poetic speech. For Graves the origin of 'the cool web of language' of poetry lies as it were in the 'watery clasp' of the womb wherein the primal senses are *intertwined*.

In so conceiving the poet-Muse paradigm was Graves mythologising his own tactile mode of perception? It would seem so.

Poetry involves, as Coleridge reminded us, one's whole being and engages, in Bacon's phrase, the '*vestigia communia*' of the senses, the latency of all in each. As early as 1925, while stating that the best poetry appeals in turn to all the senses, Graves argues that 'despite the same general education, personal history, and intellectual capacity any individuals may differ as to the merits of a poem, simply because their minds are each differently ruled by one predominant inward sense, such as sight, sound, or touch, at the expense of the others.'⁹ Unlike Wordsworth, who relied on his outward and 'inward eye', Graves claims that his own appeal to the visual sense is 'the most insecure,' and that he is 'often definitely unsympathetic' to the appeal to the sense of motion that so characterises Shelley's poetry. In Keats's work, however, although he finds examples of 'chords struck on two or three different sense-appeals at once', it is the tactile quality and Keats's appeal also to the senses of taste and smell that he finds most congenial. In the domain of social interaction, his 'intuitional spontaneousness' that he mentions in *Goodbye to All That* seems related to the immediate impressions which his hands convey of people and incidents: for example, Ezra Pound shocking Graves with the 'limpest of handshakes'¹⁰ and T. E. Lawrence stunning him by his 'morbid horror of being touched',¹¹ as well as his fingers being able to discern that even the gold medal awarded to him by the National Poetry Society of America was not fine gold.¹²

Graves's earliest recollection in *Goodbye to All That* is of a child of about two 'looking up with a sort of despondent terror' at an

open cupboard in the nursery which was filled to the ceiling with octavo volumes of Shakespeare and which stood accidentally open. Graves's father used to organise a Shakespeare reading circle at Wimbledon but it was not until he was sixteen and attended one of these meetings that Graves realised that it was the Shakespeare cupboard. The same recollection forms the basis of 'The Poet in the Nursery', the first poem in *Over the Brazier*, published thirteen years earlier. The poem is not about an infant's 'despondent terror' but a young poet's sense of wonder at discovering a book of poetry, similar to Keats's joy on first looking into Chapman's Homer. Preoccupied about a tragic poem that he had been writing, and groping down the shelves in 'a dim library' the young poet sights 'the bright green cover' of a book. Finding it 'full of poetry', he puts it down his neck 'with quick hands like a lover'. The memory of an infant's fumbling along the bookshelf slips into that of the young poet's present consciousness. The almost feverish excitement with which he gloats at the 'wonderful' but incomprehensible words which 'floated' round the nursery long afterwards is conveyed not through a visual image, astronomical or geographical as in Keats's sonnet, but by his 'hot hand' coating 'the lively emerald green' with 'intimate dark stains'.

Another and a later recollection concerns the only occasion when Graves was caned at Charterhouse, his lingering sense of outrage being that it was on his hands: 'My hands [...] are unusually sensitive. I live a lot in them; my visual imagery is defective and so I memorize largely by a sense of touch' (*Goodbye to All That*, p. 39). The echo here of Keats's remark that 'Touch has a memory' is again not a coincidence because in his 1939 essay 'How Poets See' Graves reiterates his poetic affinity with Keats. Analysing the sensuous modes of Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Milton and Donne, Graves once again refers to his earlier 'uncorrected' difficulty to appreciate Shelley's imagery of motion. But turning to Keats, Graves remarks that Keats, being 'short-sighted', allowed 'his eye to be seduced from entire vision by particular objects', saw 'little but what moved [...] not the whole

object in motion but only its edge, or highlight', and that 'to remedy this ghostliness of vision Keats invariably drew on his memory of how the objects felt, tasted, sounded or smelt.'¹³ It may be noted that this 'ghostliness of vision' is also the subject of Keats's exploration in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Keats cannot see the flowers at his feet and 'what soft incense hangs upon the boughs', but he can, in 'embalmed darkness' of an ecstatic listening to the nightingale's song, 'guess' the grass, the thicket, 'fast fading violets covered up in leaves' and 'the coming musk-rose, fully of dewy wine'. 'Embalmed darkness' suggests interplay of the visual and tactile senses and the trance-like state of consciousness in which the poet awaits the touch of the Muse's hand. In light of this, Graves's 'Those Blind from Birth' reads like a poetic manifesto in claiming that 'Those blind from birth' are better off living 'by their four sound senses', especially 'smell, tread and hand-clasp' because their 'inward-gazing eyes' can 'ignore the false perspective' of outward objects.¹⁴

There is one essay, however, 'Keats and Shelley' in *Epilogue I* (1935), in which, ostensibly under Laura Riding's influence, Graves offers a negative perspective on Keats. He begins by citing Riding's gender-based denunciation of Keats and then goes on to argue that Keats's poetic persona of 'woman, a mannish Muse, ravishing the womanish poet' is a 'perverse improvement' on 'the conventional imagery of the male poet ravishing the Muse'. Riding may well have engendered the *Epilogue* essay but she could not eclipse his deep and abiding affinity for Keats, as Graves confirmed during a conversation with the author in Deyá in February 1977.

What I am suggesting is that discovering a poetic kinship with the tactile Keats over the motile Shelley and the visual Wordsworth was a literary manifestation of the complex of various influences at work in the formulation of Graves's poet-Muse paradigm. Perhaps the most important element of this paradigm is the *frisson* of the poet's sacrificial death symbolised in Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', which, as Graves himself indicated, would meet the test of the Muse poem to arouse a

similar *frisson* in the reader.

In the case of Graves, however, his war training and his experience in the war added another dimension to his notion of the *frisson* of ritual death and to his mythologising of the hands. From several early poems as well as from graphic descriptions in *Goodbye to All That*, we learn how Graves, stumbling through the dark trenches, would snatch his fingers in horror from where he had planted them on the slimy body of an old corpse or experience the numb sensation that comes from touching the hand that is dead. Although he deplored it, the ‘homicidal eloquence’ with which the army school inculcated the battle-murder motif, ‘Kill them! Kill them!’ through illustrated lectures like ‘The Spirit of Bayonet’ continued to haunt him as the ‘ghost hand’, like what Sidney Keyes called *à propos* Thomas Hood a ‘daylight ghost’, coupled with a feeling of guilt. Both the paranoiac fury and guilt are captured in the thrice-repeated ritualistic cry in ‘Country at War’ (1918):

‘How furiously against your will,
You kill and kill again, and kill:
All thought of peace behind you cast,
Till like small boys with fear aghast,
Each cries for God to understand,
“I could not help it, it was my hand.”’¹⁵

Might it be sublimation, then, of such a haunting memory that the imagery of stabbing, thrusting, wounds and murder occurs even in some of Graves’s love poems? The following passage from *The White Goddess* (p. 439) describes the paradigm in terms of a ritual cry that is strikingly analogous to the battle cry of ‘Country at War’:

No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of

the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: 'Kill! kill! kill!' and 'Blood! blood! blood!'

Or in terms of the language of romance and myth in another passage (p. 188):

The Goddess is herself a queen bee about whom male drones swarm in midsummer, and as Cybele is often so pictured; the ecstatic self-castration of her priests was a type of the emasculation of the drone by the queen bee in the nuptial act.

'A Jealous Man', first published in 1937 in *Epilogue III*, assimilates the soldier's weapon and the sacrificial king's oak-club into a battle drama that is both immediate and mythical. The smitten lover, lying next to his beloved, imagines himself prowling on a battlefield and witnessing warfare, 'man with woman', and re-living, like a haunted soldier, the battle hysteria:

The raw knotted oak-club
Clenched in the raw fist,
The ivy-noose well flung,

The thronged din of battle,
Gaspings of the throat-snared,
Snores of the battered dying,

Tall corpses, braced together,
Fallen in clammy furrows,
Male and female [...].

Graves's cluster of images – the jealous man's 'fear-jerked forehead' sweating 'a fine musk' and a 'score of bats', 'bewitched / By the ruttish odour' 'singing at his head' – echoes the 'anguish moist and fever-dew' of Keats's lovelorn Knight but, more than

that, it evokes through associations with battle nightmare and sexual frenzy an image of sacrificial death that is integral to the White Goddess myth:

Crow, cocks, crow loud,
Reprieve the doomed devil –
Has he not died enough?

‘The raw knotted oak-club’ clenched in the raw fist of the jealous lover who dreams of male and female corpses braced together in clammy furrows in a battlefield is, mythically speaking, also the oak-club which Hercules, the pastoral sacred king, carries with him. To mythographers Graves’s interpretation and adaptation of the received version of this myth in ‘Hercules at Nemea’ (p. 175) may seem questionable but the poem is a masterly evocation of the poet’s heroic and amorous maiming by the Muse:

Muse, you have bitten through my fool’s-finger.
Fierce as a lioness you seized it
In your white teeth most amorously;
And I stared back, dauntless and fiery-eyed,
Challenging you to maim me for my pride.

See me a fulvous hero of nine-fingers –
Sufficient grasp for bow and arrow.
My beard bristles in exultation:
Let all Nemea look and understand
Why you have set your mark on this right hand.

In the ‘never altered circuit of fate’ of the poet in his ‘one story and one story only’, it is not only the right hand of the poet that is primary but also that of the Goddess who may signal her ‘graciousness’ with her right hand when ‘she crooks a finger, smiling’, while holding a leafy quince in her left hand.

While Keats does not ascribe poetic inspiration to the right hand, as Graves does, he does speak of ‘the magic hand of chance’

without which he would ‘never have relish in the faery power / Of unreflecting love’ or never ‘trace’ the ‘shadows’ of ‘huge cloudy symbols of a high romance’ when they appear ‘upon the night’s starr’d face’.¹⁶ However, Keats does link the poet’s hand to physical as well as poetic life and death in ‘This living hand’ (1819–20), possibly the last eight lines of verse he wrote:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calmed – see here it is –
I hold it towards you.¹⁷

Whether the lines are addressed to Fanny Brawne as a perceived Belle Dame Sans Merci or to a potential reader as the provider of life and meaning to the poem, they evoke the power of the hand as a poem or vice versa. Given the poet’s tactile kinship with the poem through ‘the magic hand of chance’ or that of the Muse, the relationship between the poet and the reader, the poem and its meaning, is also metaphorically one of impassioned grasping.

Graves’s paradigm of the right hand as Muse-inspired is integral to the poet being ‘second-fated’ in his White Goddess myth. However, even in the case of a left-hand-inspired poem or a work of fiction the creative relationship involves metaphorically the poet’s death, as Graves tells us in ‘To Bring the Dead to Life’ (p. 87), a ‘retrospective analysis of how he brought off the *Claudius* success’.¹⁸ In subduing his handwriting to that of another until it becomes his own and collecting ‘tokens intimate of him’ to ‘grant him life’ the poet finds himself ‘housed in his grave’. The difference is, that in a non-Muse poem or a prose work this is ‘no great magic’, but just a sleight of hand.

Arguably, Graves’s idea of the poet dying at the hands of the Muse or in the creative process has similarities to ‘negative

capability', which Keats defined as the opposite of the Miltonic or Wordsworthian 'egoistical sublime'. Martin Seymour-Smith acknowledges that Graves was 'always highly susceptible to negative capability' but laments that in *The White Goddess* 'he froze his exploration of the nature of poetry just when it might have remained in full motion'.¹⁹ In so far as the aesthetic aspect of negative capability is concerned this 'freezing' did result in Graves's poetic exploration being increasingly restricted to the shorter lyric. In its epistemological aspect, however, the White Goddess myth does not essentially deviate from the basic tenets of Keats's negative capability. Keats saw the world as a 'vale of Soul-making' where the suffering human heart is 'the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity'. At the time he wrote 'Ode to Psyche', in which Keats vows to 'build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind' for Psyche and become her priest, he was exploring an undogmatic/latitudinarian 'system of salvation' which

may have been the Parent of all the more palpable and personal Schemes of Redemption, among the Zoroastrians the Christians and the Hindoos. For as one part of the human species must have their carved Jupiter; so another part must have the palpable and named Mediator and Saviour, their Christ their Oromanes and their Vishnu.²⁰

Graves's version of 'the vale of Soul-making' may not appear to address larger questions of human suffering and salvation in the way that Keats is suggesting, but by mythologising the hands while evoking the power of the Muse in poems such as 'Hercules at Nemea', Graves draws on the spiritual meaning and propitious power associated with the right hand in our collective consciousness, ranging from mythology to religion, from romance to ritual. As Milton famously sums it up: 'Our puissance is our own, our own right hand / Shall teach us highest deeds'. It would seem, however, that in religion in the West, the right hand has always been associated with a male God. In Hindu mythology and

religion, however, regardless of whether it is any of the male trinity representing one God, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, or their consorts, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati or Durga respectively, the right hand always performs auspicious works and rituals. The Western belief remains almost exclusively in a male divinity, despite Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, to which surprisingly *The White Goddess* makes no reference. If Graves's belief in the puissance of the right hand in favour of the Goddess seems a subversion or perversion of the dominant Western belief in a male divinity, he is on home ground so far as Hinduism is concerned. The story of Hercules has a universal appeal because, as Graves points out, not only does the word Hercules have multiple meanings, but 'He is, in fact, a composite deity consisting of a great many oracular heroes of different nations at different stages of religious development; some of whom became real gods while some remained heroes.'²¹

'The myths are wearing thin', Graves laments in writing his historical grammar of poetic myth. Clearly, it is an important function of the mythopoeic imagination to retrieve and re-ignite the universal emotional life latent in a myth. And it would be fair to say that Graves was not just a Romantic myth-user. In fashioning the myth of the White Goddess out of a plethora of sources – mythology, ballads, folklore, as well as his personal life and his war experience – he demonstrated, like Yeats, how a twentieth century poet could nourish the craft of his poetry with its primal roots, while attempting to make sense of what Keats called 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without an irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

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¹ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), rev. edn, ed. by Grevel Lindop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 184–199.

² *imbas forosnai* (manifestation which enlightens) and *tenm laida* (illumination of song/breaking of the marrow).

³ ‘Moneta and Ceres: The Final Relationship Between Keats and the Imagination’, Karla Alwes, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Sep., 1988), pp. 195–219.

⁴ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography* (1929), rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 272.

⁵ *Collected Poems 1975* (London: Cassell, 1975), pp. 202, 258. Graves’s poems are quoted from this edition.

⁶ A lasting visage in a lasting bush,
A face of stone in an unending red,
Red-emerald, red-slitted-blue, a face of slate, [...]
The channel slots of rain, the red-rose-red
And weathered and the ruby-water-worn [...].

(*Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*)

⁷ As in ‘a stalk of green’, ‘the green of May’, ‘clasp of green’, royal green timber’; ‘As green commands the variables of green / So love my loves of you’.

⁸ ‘Poesy with the fine spell of words alone can save / Imagination from the sable chain / And dumb enchantment’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*).

⁹ *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1925), pp. 264–67.

¹⁰ *The Crowning Privilege: The Clark Lectures 1954–1955* (London: Cassell, 1955), pp. 121–22.

¹¹ *Goodbye to All That*, p. 247.

¹² *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (London: Cassell, 1962), p. 89.

¹³ *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922–1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), pp. 295–306 (p. 296).

¹⁴ *The Green-Sailed Vessel* (privately printed, 1971).

¹⁵ *Country Sentiment* (1920), p. 73.

¹⁶ ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 503.

¹⁷ *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 559.

¹⁸ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 246.

¹⁹ *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p. xiii.

²⁰ Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February–3 May 1819, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 783.

²¹ *The White Goddess*, p. 119.