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'MY POETRY AND THE GODDESS': ROBERT GRAVES, TONY CONRAN AND WELSH GODDESS POETRY

Matthew Smith

Abstract

This article discusses Robert Graves's contribution to Welsh writing in English, with a particular focus on the influence of Tony Conran, poet, dramatist, critic and translator. Conran's Gravesian aspects are discussed, including an unpublished piece 'My Poetry and the Goddess' sent to the present author.

Keywords: Robert Graves, Celtic, Wales, Gravesian, Tony Conran, Welsh writing, Welsh writing in English, The White Goddess, Celticism

Tony Conran (1931–2013) is recognised as one of the most prominent post-war anglophone Welsh poets, with a significant cultural legacy as a literary critic, anthologist, translator of Welsh verse and dramatist.[1] As a poet, his body of work is diverse, embracing various movements and traditions, including romanticism, Anglo-American modernism and Welsh literature. An interest in folklore, music and science also informs his work. M. Wynn Thomas's description of the 'rich amalgam of different modes, genres, discourses and registers' in Conran's poem-sequence 'Castles' could equally apply as a broader description of his poetry.[2] Whilst acknowledging the many literary and artistic movements and writers that were to be an influence on Conran, Jeremy Hooker describes Conran as having 'striking originality' as a modernist writer.[3]

Whilst numerous studies of this poet's work footnote the influence of the English poet Robert Graves on Conran, this is a subject largely unexplored. An examination of some of their similarities reveals that Conran's romantic poetry has a depth and power to match Graves as a love poet and also elucidates some of the more challenging aspects

of Conran's work. The early influence of Graves's poetry on Conran's was formative and this was recognised by Conran himself in the late poetic sequence 'Everworlds', which focuses strikingly on the English poet. Conran also provided an enlightening discussion of this subject in the unpublished personal account of his poetry, 'My Poetry and the Goddess', which will be discussed in the present paper.

There are certain parallels between Graves and Conran's upbringings, including their cultural affinity with Wales and their interest in romantic poetry and mythologies. Conran grew up in Wales having been born in India but was, to a degree, self-conscious about not being native to Wales or coming from Welsh heritage. It is recognised by Gravesian scholars that despite Graves's seeming Englishness as a writer, he was publicly contemptuous of his own country and culture and became highly attached to the landscape and traditions of Wales.[4] A number of biographers have speculated that his dislike of public school became associated with England, while holiday periods were spent in Wales at Harlech, which became associated with greater freedom and happiness.[5] Despite Graves's English nationality and his parents, who were Irish and German respectively, Graves was also to feel a sense of connection with Wales because of his experience in the Great War as a Captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and he claimed to have become an adopted Welshman through living in Harlech and the 'eating of the leek' on St David's Day while serving in the Royal Welch Fusiliers.[6] Graves's affinity with Wales and its medieval literature was not lost on Conran, who can be seen to have other similarities to Graves, not least imagining himself as an initial outsider to Wales and its traditions.[7] M. Wynn Thomas usefully describes the 'peregrine imagination of migrant writers' such as Conran who 'sought out or stumbled upon, who "discovered" and/or constructed, a culture more spiritually congenial than the one to which they were actually native' and this description is equally pertinent to Graves.[8]

Given their engagement with, and promotion of, Welsh literature, both Graves and Conran can be viewed as wanting to spearhead literary renaissances. Conran not only shared Graves's passion for Welsh medieval literature, via, in part, his reading of Graves's seminal study of poetry, *The White Goddess*, but also became familiar with Graves's romantic, Muse-worshipping and Celtic-inspired poetry which led him on to further academic and creative avenues relating to Welsh and Celtic cultures. That Conran was able to penetrate Graves's complicated mythologies (related to Welsh, Celtic, other myths and Goddess

religions) and contribute a more substantial body of work relating to these research areas reveals his own critical acumen and his specialism in Welsh verse. It is worth noting that Conran's interest in Welsh medieval literature was inspired, too, by his reading of Gwyn Williams's translations of Welsh poetry, as discussed in *Artists in Wales 2*, and this provides an alternative angle at which to look at Conran's journey into Welsh medieval research – though the Graves route is unexplored and is the focus here.[9]

In order to understand Conran's early poetic development it is necessary to look at Graves's involvement with Welsh writers. In the 1940s, Graves attempted, with little success, to spearhead a Welsh literary renaissance with Welsh writers, while living in Galmpton in Devon.[10] He corresponded with Alun Lewis, Keidrych Rhys and Lynette Roberts, and these writers proved to be of great use to him in his research and in the evolution of a new poetic identity.[11] Alun Lewis was an energising poetic influence and became Graves's ideal poet – a writer with 'integrity' whose work displayed the theme of all 'true poetry' (Lewis was to be posthumously promoted by Graves and is the only contemporary to be named in *The White Goddess*).[12] Keidrych Rhys, as the editor of the journal *Wales*, assisted Graves by publishing the prototype articles on poetry that later became greatly expanded into *The White Goddess* and Roberts was a correspondent who helped and guided Graves with his research.[13] During this period, Graves reread *The Mabinogion*, the collection of Welsh medieval stories that he had originally read during the First World War, and came up with a hypothesis that a number of Welsh texts hid druidical secrets relating to a lost matriarchal Celtic culture suppressed by the Romans and, later, Christians. In evolving this theory, his reading of the antiquarian book *Celtic Researches* (1804) by Edward Davies was critical.[14] In collating supposed evidence from Welsh myths, he was looking for evidence to back up his theories that patriarchal religions had violently suppressed the true religion of Goddess worship. Graves came to revere Welsh poetry because of his discovery of the supposed evidence, which was to be put forward in *The White Goddess*. Conran's own Welsh neo-romanticism was partly inspired by Graves's interest in Welsh poetry and antiquarianism.

Given that Graves found particular success in the late 1940s and 1950s (resulting in his being elected to the five-year Oxford Professorship of Poetry for 1961–6) and achieved a renewed following because of *The White Goddess*, it is easy to see how he must have become a role model

for Conran.[15] Graves's Muse-inspired poetic ideology, themes, motifs and imagery recur throughout Conran's early romantic poetry and this poetic inheritance is discussed by Conran in his memoir *Visions and Praying Mantids*. It is also further elaborated on in the decade just before Conran's death, where the present author's correspondence with him resulted in a lengthy (and hitherto unpublished) discussion of Conran's affinity with Graves and how this was to influence his poetry in 'My Poetry and the Goddess', a three-part account accompanying a letter.[16] This reflective exercise at this time, as explored in this article, may have prompted a celebration of Graves within the poetic sequence 'Everworlds' (2006).

Conran's early Graves-inspired poetry came about in the early 1950s when he was a student at Bangor University (where he later became a University Tutor in the School of English). Conran clearly appreciated the Classical and Celtic-inspired modern poetry written by Graves and can be seen to have taken up the challenge set by the English-born poet in *The White Goddess* of writing as a modern Muse poet. In 1997, Conran's memoir about his life as a poet, *Visions and Praying Mantids: The Angelological Notebooks*, reads as a much-condensed and personal version of *The White Goddess* in that it is a spiritual autobiography of the poet and, taking inspiration from Coleridge (as Graves also did), Conran calls it his *Biographia Literaria*.[17] A quick glance at some of the chapter headings – 'The Calling of Poetry', 'Factory and Art', 'The Muse', 'The Welshness of Things', 'The Poet's Audience', 'The Game and the Horror', and 'Fairy Tales' – indicates how they reflect some of the major themes in *The White Goddess*: the role of the poet in modern society; the challenge to poetry, religions and mythology in a modern, industrialised, increasingly secular and (in Graves's opinion) culturally philistine modern society; the drama and poetic inspiration of heightened love; the interest in highly idealised female figures as the inspiration behind poetry; Welsh poetry as a source of inspiration.[18] Poetry, we learn in *Visions and Praying Mantids*, was a difficult craft for Conran to acquire. With his high standards and continual redrafting, satisfaction was rarely achieved. Like Graves, he considered himself a private lyric and romantic poet, one who wrote poems as 'self-expression'. Conran explains that he lacked the ambition for public acclaim that Graves arguably had – the 'bourgeois dream of imposing myself on history as a personality or a unique point of view'.[19] Graves's mission in the mid-1940s to spearhead a literary renaissance and educate poets in 'true poetry' can be seen as

being somewhat different to Conran's as, by Conran's own admission, he did not wish to find his own voice – instead, his ambition as a traditionalist was to add to the 'deposit' of culture.[20] Graves thus can be seen as having had grander ambitions: to establish himself as the leading modern poet and authority on poetry rather than Conran's more modest objectives.

In *Visions and Praying Mantids*, Conran describes his self-education in romantic poetry when as a young man he spent a summer translating Dante's canzoni and sonnets because Dante was 'the best authority on unrequited love'. He adds that it was difficult to find a 'true' vocabulary because of the models that influenced him – 'Housman and Shakespeare, Rilke, Yeats, Eliot and Graves' – and that he found himself being inspired by medieval Welsh. Having left the University College of North Wales, Bangor, at Easter 1955, he took a menial day job in a Chelmsford factory and translated Welsh poems in a public library in the evening, an activity which he describes with good humour as 'about as useless and atavistic in Chelmsford as shoeing horses or thatching roofs'.[21] Either consciously or unconsciously, he took up the gauntlet laid down by Graves – that poets could learn a great deal from Welsh poetry and should take up the calling of 'Muse' poetry – but unlike Graves, who rejected organised religion, he was received into the Catholic Church, gained a knowledge of the Welsh language, and clearly did not consider Welsh poetry through the ages to be particularly Muse-inspired.[22] Thus he was not entirely in the mould of the anti-Christian and Muse-worshipping Graves. Conran, when reading *The White Goddess*, may have questioned Graves's polemic against the Church and felt rather detached from his overall paganistic outlook. Nevertheless, the beguiling and erotic figure of the Muse was of great fascination and this may account for the tensions in Conran's Muse poetry.

Though *The White Goddess* and *Visions and Praying Mantids* are two very different texts, not least in length, both contain the same story of stumbling across 'true' poetry when the authors researched medieval Welsh verse. Their passion for Muses, both literary and living, is just one example of how parts of their work and ideas run in parallel. Conran confirmed the debt of influence to Graves in a letter to the present author.[23] He explains in greater detail the history of his engagement with Graves's theories in the unpublished series of documents entitled 'My Poetry and the Goddess'. Conran explains that he has always revered Graves as a 'fine and dedicated poet – a very readable one too and some

of his poems […] seem to me to be among the very greatest of the twentieth century'. Conran read Graves in 'the very early fifties – […] the 1946 *Collected* and *Poems and Satires* 1951' and considers such poems as 'Darien' and 'She tells her love while half asleep' as enchanting – some of 'the finest poems I know'. The poem 'Darien' Conran describes as the 'Kubla Khan' of the twentieth century for its account of 'what it is to write a real poem, how it finds you under the inspiration of a girl/lover/goddess […] and demands you give up everything for it'. Conran discusses the influence of *The White Goddess*, which he borrowed from the Beaconsfield library and found it a 'curate's egg of a book' – he was excited by its dogma and found 'fun' in 'playing games' with 'dubious speculation' about 'tree alphabets', including a love poem written to a girl called Bethan based on 'a charade on two of the letters'. Conran further adds that several of his poems of the 1950s and 1960s bear the influence of Graves, including 'Three Swans on the River of Death', 'The Quest', and 'The Twin'.[24] This serves as useful background information in coming to a better understanding of Conran's particular brand of romanticism and demonstrates how the younger poet's particular evolution was linked to specific reading and, with it, poetic theories and language. Conran's analysis of Graves, Muse poetry, and his own work is an extension of his analysis of his poetic development and his ideas regarding Muses in *Visions and Praying Mantids*.

The first chapter of *Visions and Praying Mantids*, 'The Calling of Poetry', describes the inspiration Conran gained as a poet from his own version of the Goddess; how he 'received (so to speak) "Three Swans on the River of Death", a poem which told me of the Muse calling me with her fatal power that neither life nor death could dispel'. For many years after this, he was conscious that his poetry, with its Christianity and Muse worship, must be wrought with tension. He adds that:

> It would be difficult to imagine a more mediaeval conflict, or one more out of key with contemporary feeling. The goddess was everywhere – in the cry of curlews, in the smile of a girl, in the darkness of which I created my poems. I did not write poetry because I had something to say. I wrote poetry because it was my calling, what I was born for.[25]

The writing of this poem appears to have been a defining moment. It was supposedly written intuitively and unconsciously – a poem about

the Muse-Goddess figure being beyond 'world power'. On the other hand, he realised that it was an 'empty formula', one that must have been unconsciously borrowed:

> The most deeply rooted faculties of my mind were an extrovert and intensely inquisitive intelligence and an introvert intuition. The dark world of intuition, verging on mysticism, was from the beginning where I felt my home was. In 1951 I wrote a poem 'Three Swans'; about the Muse as being beyond world power, religion and death. The trouble was, this claim was purely formal – an empty formula without any relation to the rest of my life. As a presence it loomed over me, sometimes in a terrifying way, sometimes as a comfort, a kind of abstract Celtic twilight where the cry of owl and curlew haunted my senses with intimations of the goddess calling to me through the darkness. I wrote a lot of very bad verse, very self-indulgent, romantic stuff, trying to express this inchoate sense of female mystery, female tragedy as well. For the Muse was always a tragic figure, a *pietà*.[26]

Conran soon realised that the 'empty formula' of the Muse as the Goddess was an enormously attractive one that bore little relation to his life and did not comfortably fit in with his attitude to women.[27] The tension in Conran's romantic poetry therefore developed – one that can be identified in many of his poems from the 1950s – a tension over depicting the woman as a living Muse and therefore a source of inspiration versus the exaggeration of portraying women as goddess-like and otherworldly presences. Conran himself found this area of his work derivative. A series of Muse poems from *Formal Poems* (1958), also anthologised in *Collected Poems* (2006), meditate on these different aspects of being in love;[28] 'Summer-faded' explores the innocence of poetic love;[29] the enlightenment that love brings is explored in 'Open Sesame';[30] the excitement of anticipation and expectation is in 'Nothing Stops You';[31] the pain when love is unrequited in 'To my Muse';[32] the (strongly Gravesian) resentment of a love rival is expressed in 'Hermes';[33] the frustration of desire is the theme of 'Christmas is coming';[34] and the powerful bond of love that will overcome personal disaster is the subject of 'A Winter's Tale'.[35]

The poem 'To my Muse' could come straight out of Robert Graves's *Poems and Satires* (1951), comparable to such similarly notable poems

as the elder poet's 'In Dedication' and 'Darien'. The naming of the female subject is immediately resonant of Graves's female archetype – she is explicitly named the 'White Goddess'. The poem also explores the difficulties of being a Muse poet. This difficult poem seems to suggest that the poetic speaker is expressing the fact that he is having second thoughts about writing for a Muse. The poem celebrates the female subject's beauty, but it is soon clear to the reader that the attention is unwanted. The speaker cannot see what harm there is in naming his Muse and concludes that the female subject, the 'strumpet', should save her anger (and support his need to write):

> And if I use your name, what signifies?
> Is it a forgery to fake blue eyes?
> Whom, strumpet, can the legal fiction move
> If I should boast, in passing, of your love?
> No penalties enforce belief in such a creed –
> Save your contempt, White Goddess, and my need.[36]

'Summer-Faded' laments the passing of 'vain loving' – innocent love.[37] The pain of unrequited love has spoiled such carefree innocence and now the prospect of platonic friendship is a boring one to the speaker of the poem. 'Out of Loveshot', the next poem of the collection, delights in 'feminine days', but the threat of rejection looms in the background of the poem.[38] The beaks of 'curlew[s]' on the beach could symbolise the threat of intimate love being snatched away. The subject of 'Pine and Sunset' is a pine tree that has withstood the heat of the sun.[39] This poem, which could be allegorical of real or mythical events, describes the tree as being the sister of 'Daphne'. In Greek mythology, Daphne was a huntress who refused to marry and rejected all of her predatory admirers, including the god Apollo. To protect her from his advances she was turned into a laurel tree. In the poem, the sister tree, the pine, flees 'The same god / […] the sun God', Apollo. This poem clearly draws on the same kind of language of poetic myth that Graves used and espoused. As an aspiring Romantic poet, he clearly took on the romantic notion that strong, resilient, and beautiful women, whether real or mythical, could inspire poetry. However, in the Welshman's poetry their cruelty is usually unintentional. The speaker's pain comes out of unrequited love rather than being victim to the cruelty of a goddess who is fickle and has no mercy. The influence of Conran's other hero, the love poet

Dante, must have had a bearing on how far he took Graves's theories. Evidently, Dante's Muse poems to Beatrice were more personal than Graves's, which tend to universalise the traits of the individual Muse. Sally Roberts Jones, the Welsh poet, is quite right when she claims that 'To Erato' is a particularly Gravesian poem.[40] In the first stanza, the speaker asks if he should 'Cry out' to show his unrivalled 'lust' for the female subject. He imagines the Muse or Goddess-figure as guarded. She is self-protective and keeps her dignity:

> Should I, waxing importunate,
> Cry out, startling the ancient walls
> With such lust as its memory
> May not parallel, save in myth . . .
>
> You'd turn, guardedly; contemplate
> Male threats, fondly invoking no
> Vain god, daemon or genius,
> Save this lilt of your idle smile.[41]

The speaker of 'Pine and Sunset' suggests that the Muse knows he is vain and pretentious, but believes that she appreciates his attention. The speaker is isolated, has little in terms of pedigree or status, and lacks a genuine poetic voice. He therefore feels inferior and needs to write the subject's 'epitaph'. If it is correct to interpret the poem in this way, then the poem, symbolically, announces the doom of this unequal relationship:

> You know where I am capable:
> Not thus, challenging ancient pride,
> You with Helen comparing, and
> I drunk, strutting in borrowed robes;
>
> But lost, claimed of no giant past
> Nor yet stooping to mimicry:
> This hand writes out our epitaph
> With each word's missed magnificence.[42]

Looking back at his intensely romantic period of 1951, Conran states that he had not yet found a poetic voice. This is, of course, suggested by the insecurity of the above poem, where the speaker feels that he is

'strutting in borrowed robes'. This is reflected in the Gravesian poetic voice – the poetry of dry, ironic detachment, the use of archaic, inverted syntax. 'The empty formula without any relation to the rest of my life' – the idea of a Muse or Goddess being 'beyond world power, religion and death' – was a theory from Graves which the impressionable young poet had picked up and then rejected because it clearly went against his conscience. The concept, for him, had beauty and it gave him a sense of being in an 'abstract Celtic twilight where the cry of owl and curlew haunted my senses with intimations of the goddess calling to me through the darkness' but it had no room for the Christian God.[43] Clearly, *The White Goddess*, with its assortment of powerful, mysterious and erotic goddess figures and its arcane language of poetic myth, affected him deeply, even if the younger poet realised that these were imaginative constructs. At school and later on in the trenches, Graves lacked contact with women; by his own admission Conran, too, was sexually naïve as a young man. Thus, both poets seemed to have complex feelings about the nature of women and in Classical literature they found a kind of poetry with an ancient pedigree – Muse poetry – which exalted, objectified, and dramatised the female figure. In developing a personal religion, Graves undoubtedly took this further than Conran.

In 'My Poetry and the Goddess', Conran reports that Graves's 'Darien' was one of the poems that greatly inspired his poetry – he states, as we have seen, that it is 'one of the finest poems I know, the "Kubla Khan" of the twentieth century'. He adds that it is:

> about what it is to write a real poem, how it finds you under the inspiration of a girl/lover/goddess (cf. the damsel with a dulcimer in Coleridge) and demands you give up everything for it. Academics who think it is just a poem that Graves wrote because his theory demanded he should, don't know what they're blathering about. Believe me, as the saying goes, I've been there, I've bought the T-shirt.[44]

'Darien', a poem allegedly written in dedication to one of Graves's living Muses, is one of his longest poems about the Goddess figure. In it, the speaker tells Darien, a boy, about the facts of his origin. They are as follows: his mother, a living goddess, once wielded a 'Cretan axe' and had long strides; she was associated with the moon; she told the poet (who is the speaker of the poem) that their eyes cannot meet because it

would result in the engendering of a prodigious child and his immediate death; the submissive poetic speaker accepts that he will have to die by decapitation in order to give life to the boy who is truly gifted and has many forms (like Taliesin). The poet imagines, too, that his severed head will become 'oracular' and this is confirmed because the speaker, following the logic of the poem, is now a talking head. The first verse of the poem represents Graves's belief system at its most basic. Conran adopted this even though it conflicted with his Christian beliefs:

> It is a poet's privilege and fate
> To fall enamoured of the one Muse
> Who variously haunts this island earth.[45]

Conran states that he became temporarily lost in this poem. This is not surprising because he may have identified similar poetic motifs, for example, the 'oracular' head, which reflects not only the myth of Orpheus but also the myth of Bran. With further parallels to Celtic mythology, the figure of Darien becomes Taliesinic, a mythical shape shifter:

> 'He is the northern star, the spell of knowledge,
> Pride of all hunters and all fishermen,
> Your deathless fawn, and eaglet of your eyrie,
> The topmost branch of your unfellable tree,
> A tear streaking the summer night,
> The new green of my hope.'
> Lifting her eyes,
> She held mine for a lost eternity.
> 'Sweetheart,' said I, 'strike now, for Darien's sake!'[46]

In *Visions and Praying Mantids*, Conran's chapter on 'The Muse' looks at this romantic tradition in Classical, medieval, and modern poetry. Homer, Catullus, Virgil, Dante, Keats, Hardy, and Dylan Thomas, all feature in his discussion (though Thomas is not seriously considered as a Muse poet). A more extended treatment of the subject is given in his short review of Graves and Jung. 'The Muse', as he understands the concept, is the 'goddess of the compulsion to sing or do trigonometry or tell jokes – or write poems; just as Venus was the goddess of sex or Mars the god of fighting' (Conran's descriptions are deliberately casual

or whimsical because he is clearly trying to avoid being too 'atavistic or precious'). He continues:

> Whenever your everyday behaviour was superseded by an impersonal force, the Greeks tended to put it down to the activity of a god or goddess [..] at its most intense (say, in a man who has fallen in love or under the bloodlust of battle) [it] qualifies as demonic possession. [47]

'In addition, the job of the epic poet relies most heavily on assistance from the Muse:

> He has to have some superhuman power, automatic pilot or Muse to see him through. And whereas the jazz musician or the soccer player are buoyed up by the rest of the band or the other soccer players are buoyed up by the other members of the team, the epic poet works by himself, so there is nothing but his talent, his formulae and the trust in his muse to stand between him and failure.[48]

The difference between the 'epic' Muse, the female spirit of poetry, who was invoked through a set prayer, and the living 'Muse' – a woman who arouses sexual passions – is made quite clear here. Conran likens the relationship between female Muse and poet to that of a mother and son, giving the example of Beatrice who scolds Dante, when they meet in the earthly paradise.[49]

The relatively complex relationship between Muse and poet brings Conran on to his next subject – Robert Graves. He looks at Graves's 'triune' Muse (the maiden, mother, and hag) and states that it is one of the two main 'theoretical systems on the market' which offer to explain the Muse, the other being Carl Jung's. Conran explains Graves's theories:

> The Muse is the primordial Goddess, the Earth-Mother, who was worshipped by Neolithic farmers all the world over. The ancient tribal kings derived their power and their immortality from her, both as her sons and as her lovers. They were also her victims, sacrificed to her for the good of the crops. In some never quite explained way, true poets are descended from her shaman-like priests. They keep to her worship though the rest of mankind has forsaken her

> for the usurping male deities – Zeus, Apollo or Jehovah […] True poetry, which can only be composed under her love and inspiration, is an embodiment of her truth.[50]

Jung's secular version of this theory – that there is a female element in every man (the 'anima') – had appeal for Conran. He contrasts this with Jung's idea that '[a]n inherited collective image of woman exists in a man's unconscious, with the help of which he can apprehend the nature of women'.[51] The collected images, he says, are 'inconsistent with one another'. As with Graves's reading, there are specific archetypes of women that men hold onto and which inform their perception of the other sex.

Conran distances himself from both theories, which he describes as 'pretty shaky constructions'. As 'notions', he adds, they are interesting and 'can give you tools to understand and chart what is happening to you in the experience of loving a Muse'. He moves onto the subject of Muses in Welsh medieval poetry, with the un-Gravesian contention that apart from Ceridwen, who was Graves's archetypal Welsh hag, there is a lack of them. Welsh poetry, Conran concludes, is a rather 'masculine affair' with male magicians outwitting pseudo-goddess figures. Welsh poetry, after Dafydd ap Gwilym, he further argues, had an element of Muse poetry in it but this came from poems addressed to 'girls' and 'sweethearts'. This is not the kind of 'true poetry' that Graves thought made Welsh poetry great and, indeed, this runs counter to the elder poet's repeated assertion that goddess figures had been either obscured or censored in Welsh poetry and myth.

Conran's memoir further contains several anecdotes about his past as a Muse poet. Under the influence of living Muse figures, Judy, Liz and Margaret, he explains that he evolved his own poetic language – not one of poetic myth but more of paradoxes. He mentions the 'dichotomies of the Muse' – 'Darkness and light, dream and everyday reality, night star and secret of day':

> A great many of these are love poems, calling out to her to come to me, to let me into her darkness. Others are narratives, in which I gave her dreams. I mean that quite literally.[52]

Unsurprisingly, in this metaphorical, creative darkness, the process of writing a poem is compared to a 'flash' of inspiration. In his poem 'In

Dedication', Graves describes the flash of Muse inspiration as the 'bright bolt'. Here, Conran draws on a similar image of the elemental force of the goddess:

> Words would wash over me, all kinds of words, beautiful, ugly words [...] then a phrase, or a line or two, would come that had power. Liz was all around me, I was talking to her. The poem was there. After that, it was more like delivering a baby than anything else. Pulling it out whole. Sometimes, for a minute or two, the tension would break and I would surface […] It was like delivering a baby. It was like intimate love-making talk. It was like dancing. It was the most concentrated work I have ever done.[53]

This cautious approach to Graves and Jung belies the fact that, here, he seems persuaded by the concept of the Muse and describes her effect on his writing in a dramatic and romantic way. Conran's two modes, the academic and the poetic, are really working at cross-purposes. The academic side discounts Graves's 'shaky' theories but the poetic side knows instinctively that the concept of the Muse and Goddess has life and vitality in his own poetry. As he points out, 'the manifestations of the Muse are very varied; and no two Muses are alike'.[54] This statement is not Conran as a rationalist, academic, or technician of verse; it is the romantic side that has an implicit, 'poetic' understanding of the Muse and the idea of the 'White Goddess'.

The 'neglected' poems to Liz are described as 'my *Titus Andronicus*'. Here, there is something particularly nostalgic about the poems and the process by which they were written. Their critical neglect Conran puts down to the 'contemporary poetic climate', where such confessional romanticism is unfashionable. He argues that the far-reaching influence of imagism and the post-Freud and Jung 'empiricism' have also made such poetry 'unfashionable' and 'atavistic'.[55] Conran rejects the charge made by Jeremy Hooker that he is 'late romantic'. Instead, he argues, such poems were Modernist and 'sceptical of mythologies'. This dichotomy is evident through Conran's work – the conflict between poetic rationalism and romanticism. His poem about Muse Liz and her boyfriend, 'Hermes', may contain Modernist experiments with layout and form but it is remarkably traditional – a synthesis of pagan and Classical allusions are put into a contemporary context. The story of the poem is as follows: it is a dream where the poet looks into the tears of

his Muse (Liz) and sees in her eyes a mythical landscape which leads to her death. Hermes Psychopompos, the leader of souls (Liz's boyfriend), agrees to let her go, but she must give him the 'life of her womanhood, represented by the two herons':

> Is mercy flowering in the lands of the dead
> as over the river the winged feet walk
> in the auburn dusk of your tears?
>
> The squat grey fortress on the bank
> hidden in alder is like a toad
> whose staring eyes command your dream.
>
> The trim and naked god, whose company
> all ghosts find grateful, touches
> hardly at all the golden foam he walks.
>
> I watch two herons with stretched legs
> and necks bent like a tripod, wheel
> on the rags of their rectangular wings.
>
> They are so old, and such impoverished
> Simeons, that the brisk god of robbers
> permits them to inhabit this near death.
>
> Their life ignores his force. They fly
> like dowagers of a once lovely epoch
> giving bright honour to such childish tears.[56]

Conran states that he found it difficult to explain the details of the poem because it was inspired by a dream. Perhaps some of this difficulty lies in the fact that he had forgotten some of the mythological sources (from Graves) and motifs that had inspired him. The archetypal imagery appears to be drawn almost directly from Graves's description of the 'antique story' in chapter one of *The White Goddess*. Hermes represents the 'weird, or rival', a 'trim and naked' god who threatens to overpower the Muse or Goddess (such is her power that he can see landscape, both present and past, in her eyes).[57] The flying herons represent her honour even though the girl is in great distress. The 'squat grey fortress' might,

according to this mythology, represent the home of the poet. It is hidden in 'alder' (a wood that Graves states was sacred to the Celts) and 'is like a toad / whose staring eyes command your dream'. (The toad is also significant to Graves's mythology in *The White Goddess* and features in his reconstruction of the Welsh medieval poem 'Cad Goddeu'.) The house 'commands' the dream of the Muse so it presumably represents the poet who in the real world gave the 'dream to Liz'. Conran himself accepts that many of his poems are 'inchoate'; they are difficult for him to explain and he accepted that in the writing of his early Muse poems, he was possessed with a Graves-like determination to evoke the power of his Muses in language.[58]

It is, of course, an inaccuracy to suggest that anything faintly mythological and related to the Muse must have come through Graves's influence. It is also inaccurate to see Conran's romantic poetry as wholly modelled on Graves's. Conran himself was learned – a folklorist, a music-lover, and an aficionado of poetry – and these diverse interests evidently inform his work. There is also the deeply religious and 'contemplative' side of Conran where he explained that Catholicism acts as a kind of Muse, or inspirational force, which leads to poetry.[59] Blake and Dante (as mentioned earlier) were also poets that Conran greatly admired and wished to emulate.[60] Graves, on the other hand, had little interest in these poets and viewed Christianity as anathema to poetry. Conran, unlike Graves, finds no contradiction between Muse worship and contemplative (religious) poetry. In an essay entitled 'Contemplative Poetry', Conran states that the poet 'goes down into the darkness to find' the poem. His journey is described in a Ted Hughes-like fashion. It is:

> quasi shamanistic, a kind of exercise in shape-shifting, a journey to another world. In that sense his going into the darkness is applied contemplation, lacking perhaps the purity of contemplative prayer […] muses […] almost always they function as guides. They lead the imagination into new territory.[61]

Late in life, Conran wrote a number of dedicatory poems to and about Graves, a fitting tribute to a writer who had clearly been an important influence on the genesis of his writing.[62] The *Second Movement* of 'Everworlds', 'Passage to Dejà', which is dedicated '*i.m. Robert Graves (1895–1985)*', is a sequence of elegiac dream-sequences dominated by

the motif of the 'everworld', an imagined multi-realm of poetic enchantment. The first poem 'Dejà Unvisited' evokes the ghost of an ailing Graves and a Muse-figure haunting the landscape of the Majorcan village where Graves made his home, presumably the near-mythical figure of Laura Riding.[63] The dominant mood of the poem is pathos – the speaker laments the loss of a great mind. The next poem in the sequence, 'The Erosion of Everworlds', portrays the disintegration and rebirth of the poetic imagination likened to organic materials breaking down and evolving in a dynamic and changing natural world.[64] This poem is very different from those related directly to the subject of Graves's life but as an analogy of the poetic process its inclusion may reflect on the poetic processes Conran felt they shared, represented in metaphysical terms.

The speaker of the poem 'Castle' in the same sequence, a passage that appears to directly allude to Graves's life, evokes the haunting, ancient, and wild atmosphere around Harlech. The speaker has shamanistic powers ('Listening to the dreams / Of an everworld ocean') and imagines the sky full of the song of the birds of Rhiannon (from *The Mabinogion*). The poem concludes with a description of play in the gatehouse of Harlech Castle which resonates with Graves's youth. Graves's autobiography *Goodbye To All That* describes his childhood play at Harlech Castle and Conran may have written the poem with this autobiographical detail in mind.[65] The fourth piece, 'Soldier', meditates on the devastating physical and mental injuries Graves suffered in the Great War. The speaker of the poem imagines that these wounds have caused the subject of the poem a lifelong nightmare, leading to mental deterioration and dementia, culminating in death, over sixty years later.

> Screaming from his wounds,
> Hurts that bled
> All his life to nightmare
>
> And cut him, sixty years
> Later, into a separate world, from
> Speech itself, and motion[66]

The theme of nightmare features again in 'Oxford, 1919', which juxtaposes the tranquillity of Graves's post-war studies at Oxford with the

horror of the poet's flashbacks to the war. The speaker imagines Graves's peace disturbed by the river – 'Heavy red, a freight of corpses / Popping like balloons, / Flowed'.[67] Graves documented in *Goodbye to All That* the effects of shellshock, particularly how neurasthenia had resulted in him seeing visions of the dead from the battlefront, and Conran seems to be alluding to this.[68] One of Conran's most Gravesian pieces, also from 'Everworlds', is 'From the Calendar of the Tree Alphabet' which acts as a prelude to the next poem, 'The Goddess Sings', subtitled '*at the Spring Equinox*'. Both pieces may appear impenetrable unless the reader has an understanding of *The White Goddess* and Celtic tree alphabets. The former piece details the Celtic tree alphabet that Graves discusses at length in *The White Goddess*, the 'Beth Luis Nion Onn', which, he argued, was the key to druidical secrets about an ancient matriarchal religion in Celtic culture, subsequently suppressed by patriarchal religions. Conran ascribes to each letter a time period of the year, with Onn being the Spring Equinox. The latter poem is a dedicatory poem to the goddess of the Spring Equinox. The singing goddess describes her 'primary land', a barren, cold, and austere landscape. She is a force of nature, described as being day, night and also carried by water, an inhuman and cruel mother-nature figure:

> Waters carried me through a land of ash
> Under Gorse Mountain
> To a well where my lips were rash
> At witchcraft's fountain

This is, of course, a very Gravesian poem, an accomplished example of the kind of 'true poem' Graves wanted poets to write. In 'To the Utmost', the speaker contrasts himself as the 'Hound' with the grotesque, feminised 'vixen earth'. Graves is imagined as an 'elder brother' who 'Egged me on' amongst the chaos and uncertainty of poetic production. Graves is imagined by name as a male Muse-figure, one who is a source of encouragement and literary inspiration. This is reinforced by utilising Gravesian language and imagery, a way of further evoking and celebrating Graves and his personal mythology.

'The Peony' describes the significance of a tulip tree on Graves's estate in evoking the memory of the dead poet (above other things, the poet's books). The tree is fictitious, as Conran explains in his explanatory notes to the poem, as it comes from an 'unconscious memory' of the

elder poet's poem 'The Moon Ends in Nightmare'. The English poet is then mythologised as the lost 'magician' and 'poet' or 'Celt' in a 'shrunk Parnassus'. The first three stanzas of the poem imagine Graves being 'sucked' out of the material world to a mythic afterlife, a land haunted by signs of the White Goddess:

> After he died, and the everworlds
> Sucked him out like a pipette –
> – Every drop of him
>
> From the superficies of time –
> On the long rustling journey
> To the doubtful isles
>
> Where the warm rock, white egrets in the foam
> And vermilion rowan-berries
> Gleam like lips of a kiss ...

This sequence of poems, together with writings about poetry such as *Visions and Praying Mantids* and 'My Poetry and the Goddess', suggest that Graves's poetic vision left an indelible mark on this most eclectic of poets, even though Conran had misgivings about the matriarchal and goddess theories that largely defined the later career of Graves. As 'true' poets go, Graves would have undoubtedly approved of Conran despite their ideological differences. Graves may have questioned the influence of organised religion (i.e. Catholicism) on Conran, whereas Conran could have also scrutinised Graves's poetical concepts and understanding of Welsh literature. Yet Graves would unmistakeably have seen the Welsh poet as a disciple of his poetic ideology, a writer of the kind of verse that he believed to be 'gold'. He may have considered Conran, on the basis of his early work, as the worthy successor to Alun Lewis and himself, modern 'true' poets with integrity. Conran's late accounts of the influence of Roberts Graves's work in 'My Poetry and the Goddess' and his strikingly vivid pieces dedicated to the elder poet in 'Everworlds' thus demonstrate the Gravesian influence on some of Conran's work. Both were conservers of a particular type of poetry linked to ancient religions, whilst also steeping themselves in Welsh medieval poetry, and, taking inspiration from Graves, Conran was to make an invaluable contribution to Welsh literature.

Notes

[1] Tony Conran was born in India before being brought as a baby to Colwyn Bay and Liverpool to be brought up by his maternal grandparents. This was followed by a University education at Bangor, North Wales. See Meic Stephens (ed.), *New Companion to Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. 118–19.

[2] M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures: the two literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999). M. Wynn Thomas's wide-ranging chapter on Conran's legacy in Welsh writing in English looks in detail at the poet's work: his prominence as one of the most outstanding post-war Welsh poets (in English); his translation work; his experiments with Welsh versification; and similarities and differences with other 'migrant' writers. Robert Graves is mentioned.

[3] Jeremy Hooker, 'Introduction', in Tony Conran *Three Symphonies* (East Sussex: Agenda Editions, 1995), p. 10.

[4] Graves is frequently described as an English poet. In Michael Schmidt's *An Introduction to 50 Modern Poets*, he is categorised as an English poet with 'classical precision' who was a prominent 'Georgian' and later became an expatriate poet of 'sexual love'. Michael Schmidt, *An Introduction to 50 Modern Poets* (London: Pan Literature Guides, 1979), pp. 167–9. C. K Stead, in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement*, views his early work as in the 'Georgian realist tradition' and as belonging to 'a native tradition that includes Hardy, Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen […] then Auden and his contemporaries, Roy Fuller, and on to John Betjeman, Philip Larkin and the Movement […] these have been the English poets'. See C. K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (London: MacMillan, 1986), p. 348.

[5] There are several biographies of Robert Graves including the comprehensive three-part biography by Richard Perceval Graves: *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic (1895–1940)* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1986); *Robert Graves: the Years with Laura (1926–1940)* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1990) and *Robert Graves and the White Goddess (1940–1985)* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1995). See also Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (Doubleday: London, 1995) and Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (Penguin Random House: London, 1982)

[6] Letter to Keidrych Rhys, 1 December 1943. The 'Robert Graves - Keidrych Rhys' papers are housed in the McPherson Library, University of Victoria, British Columbia. The correspondence is not individually numbered so I have given dates for the correspondence in the text. Previous correspondence has not been found.

[7] The subject of Graves's complex and indeterminate cultural identity is explored in Matthew Smith, *Robert Graves and the Welsh Goddess* (PhD thesis, University of Wales, Swansea: 2006) and Matthew Smith, '"There is One Story and One Story Only" Robert Graves's Attempt to Spearhead a Literary Renaissance in 1940s Wales', *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English (Vol. 2)* (University of Wales Press: Cardiff, 2014), pp. 131–46. While he is frequently placed within an English canon of writing, Graves repeatedly expressed an affinity with Wales and Welsh culture. In *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, Fran Brearton looks at Graves's marginal position in Anglo-Irish poetry by examining the various ways in which he was anthologised on both sides of the Irish Sea (but not Wales) during his lifetime. See Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000), p. 84. She describes Graves as seizing 'upon the Celtic element, as others have done before him, because it represents symbolic separation from the England he comes to know and not to love in the Great War' (*Great War in Irish Poetry*, p. 98). While it is very important to take account of his interest in, and knowledge of, Irish mythology, it is likely that he associated the country with his father, with whom he had a

difficult relationship and may have had an anxiety of influence. He portrays his Irish father as aloof and overly centred on his own poetry. He also apparently clashed with his parents over their attitudes to war and religion. See Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That* (Jonathan Cape: London, 1929), p. 207.

[8] *Corresponding Cultures*, p. 157.

[9] 'Anthony Conran', *Artists in Wales 2*, ed. Meic Stephens (Llandysul: Gomer, 1973), pp. 111–23. I am indebted to Professor Tony Brown, via private correspondence, for highlighting the importance of Gwyn Williams's anthology on Conran's interest in Welsh medieval poetry.

[10] Grevel Lindop's introduction to *The White Goddess* provides a succinct summary of the early evolution of this text, including his 'eureka' moment of concluding that the battle of trees in the Welsh poem, 'Cad Goddeu', was an allegory of the battle of ancient religions. See Grevel Lindop, "Introduction" in *Robert Graves, The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. vii. Various aspects of Graves's Celticism are explored in the collection of essays *Graves and the Goddess*, ed. Grevel Lindop and Ian Firla (Associated University Press: London, 2003), including an article by Mary Ann Constantine on Graves's creative interpretations of Welsh medieval poetry, such as the poem 'Cad Goddeu'.

[11] The publication of the correspondence between Lynette Roberts and Robert Graves in *Poetry Wales* demonstrates clearly that Graves was very dependent on Lynette Roberts's knowledge of Welsh literature; secondly, it is clear that Graves is attempting to link with Welsh writers and start a Welsh literary renaissance and so the letters reveal Graves's motivations in engaging with Welsh writers, literature, and mythology; thirdly, we see the gradual progress of some of his ideas related to Celtic culture, matriarchal religions, and Wales. The correspondence covers a period of nine years from 1943 to 1952. The letters were a testing ground for the ideas that were published in articles in *Wales* magazine in 1944 and later in *The White Goddess*. See Joanna Lloyd, 'Correspondence between Lynette Roberts and Robert Graves', *Poetry Wales* 19:2 (1983).

[12] Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 17. The influence of Alun Lewis on Graves is examined in Matthew Smith, *Robert Graves and the Welsh Goddess* and Matthew Smith, '"There is One Story and One Story Only". Their correspondence is published in *Alun Lewis: A miscellany of his writing*s, ed. John Pikoulis (Poetry Wales P., 1982), pp. 131–49.

[13] Graves wrote three articles entitled the 'Roebuck in the Thicket' for Keidrych Rhys's *Wales* in 1944. These articles were greatly modified and expanded and later published as *The White Goddess*.

[14] From the correspondence between Lynette Roberts and Graves, we know that Roberts sent Graves Edward 'Celtic' Davies's history of Celtic language and religion, *Celtic Researches*. This was to have a significant impact on Graves's ideas, poetry and career. Edward Davies, *Celtic Researches on the Origin, Traditions and Languages of the Ancient Britons* (Banton Press: London, 1804).

[15] After the publication of *The White Goddess* in 1948, Graves was to reinvent himself as a poet. Having been a rather unfashionable literary figure for two decades, the poet, with his alternative lifestyle and beliefs, became a distinguished and patrician-like figure in poetry and Classical studies, despite the criticism he received and the indifference of scholars. Within a decade he was to become Professor of Poetry at Oxford. In an interview, Graves pointed out to Leslie Norris that his success and acclaim as a writer had been brought about by *The White Goddess* which got him into *Who's Who*, between Goebbels and Hitler, and that *The White Goddess* had been written thanks to the influence of Welsh literature. Leslie Norris interviews Robert Graves: http://www.lib.byu.edu/~english/WWI/influence/graves.html.

[16] 'My Poetry and the Goddess' (2005).
[17] Tony Conran, *Visions and Praying Mantids: the angelogical notebooks* (Gomer: Llandysul, 1997).
[18] The poet Sally Roberts Jones comments that in the 1950s Conran was often trying to persuade his friends about the merits of reading *The White Goddess*. Conversation with the present author.
[19] Conran, *Visions and Praying Mantids*, pp. 16–17.
[20] Ibid., p. 17.
[21] Ibid., pp. 17–23.
[22] Ibid., p. 47. Conran further elaborates on the relative lack of female muse figures in Welsh poetry in 'My Poetry and the Goddess'.
[23] On writing to the North Walian poet, I discovered that Graves's poetry, prose, and vision had an effect on his work that is only hinted at in his poems and prose. In our correspondence, Conran explored Graves's influence on him in a lengthy memoir, 'My Poetry and the Goddess' (5 December 2005); this text outlines his personal experiences as a Muse poet, his general understanding of these terms, various living Muses who inspired his poetry, and the influence of Graves. These documents – twenty-six pages of autobiography – and a detailed letter demonstrate his commitment to looking at this area of his work.
[24] Conran, 'My Poetry and the Goddess'.
[25] Conran, *Visions and Praying Mantids*, p. 16.
[26] Ibid., p. 16.
[27] Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 21.
[28] Anthony Conran, *Collected Poem, vol. 2, 1959–1961* (Gee and Son: Denbigh, 1965). Anthony Conran, *Formal Poems* (Christopher Davies: Llandybie, 1960).
[29] Conran, *Formal Poems*, p. 34.
[30] Conran, *Collected Poems*, p. 263.
[31] Ibid., p. 80.
[32] Conran, *Formal Poems*, p. 31.
[33] Conran, *Collected Poems*, p. 84.
[34] Ibid., p. 86.
[35] Ibid., p. 98.
[36] Conran, *Formal Poems*, p. 31.
[37] Ibid., p. 34.
[38] Ibid., p. 35.
[39] Ibid., p. 36.
[40] Sally Roberts Jones, 'The Poet as Mentor', *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Tony Conran*, ed. Nigel Jenkins (Cardiff: Welsh Union of Writers, 1995), p. 17.
[41] Conran, *Formal Poems*, p. 47.
[42] Ibid., p. 47.
[43] Conran, *Visions and Praying Mantids*, p. 16.
[44] Conran, 'My Poetry and the Goddess'.
[45] Conran, *The Collected Poems*, p. 437.
[46] Ibid., 190. 'The Stroke' (*Collected Poems 2*, 41) contains the lines 'Your shaded, beautiful eyes conceal and cloak / the savagery, sweetheart, of the sudden stroke' two lines that loosely correspond with the imagery of 'Darien' (discussed later), where the meeting of the poet's eyes with the Goddess brings about his decapitation.
[47] Conran, *Visions and Praying Mantids*, p. 43.
[48] Ibid., p. 44.
[49] Ibid., p. 45.
[50] Ibid, p. 46.

[51] These must be Jung's words, although Conran gives no reference.
[52] Ibid., p. 51.
[53] Ibid., pp. 52–3.
[54] Ibid., p. 53.
[55] Ibid., p. 53.
[56] Ibid., p. 60.
[57] Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 20.
[58] In 'My Poetry and the Goddess', Conran explains that he still has difficulty explaining his own language of poetic myth when writing the 'Liz poems'.
[59] Graves was not entirely against Roman Catholicism. He saw that the cult of the Virgin Mary was in keeping with the idea of the Muse or Goddess but, as a general principle, Graves is against organised patriarchal religions. See *The White Goddess*, p. 138.
[60] Conran discusses the power and intelligence of Dante as a poet of unrequited love in 'My Poetry and the Goddess'.
[61] Conran, *Visions and Praying Mantids*, pp. 84–5.
[62] I thank Professor Tony Brown for sending me the unpublished poems of Tony Conran. I am also indebted to Tony and Lesley Conran for giving permission for me to have access to both published and unpublished material.
[63] Conran, *Three Symphonies*, p. 91.
[64] Ibid, p. 92.
[65] In Graves's memoir, he states 'We used to go climbing in the turrets and towers of Harlech Castle' (*Goodbye To All Tha*t, p. 62).
[66] Conran, *Three Symphonies*, p. 93.
[67] Ibid., p. 95.
[68] Conran, 'My Poetry and the Goddess'.