SCANNING THE MUSE

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ABSTRACT

Poetry springs from a sense of the beauty and terror in creation, personified as the Muse—whose presence is evoked in the poem. The presence can be identified with the sense. A bird's-eye-round-up of poetry through the ages will consistently confirm this -- from the Song of Solomon to the work of Francisco Balagtas. Thus poetry can be considered religious, in a qualified sense of the word, in nature. It is essentially in praise, at times in dread, of the Muse or goddess, who is a metaphor or symbol for the creative force in creation. True poets, even when they have not been instructed in this esoterica, come to it by intuition or instinct.

We find the Goddess authentically described in the two fictional masterpieces of Roman Classicism.

The Golden Ass by Apuleius contains, according to Robert Graves, "the most comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature" (Graves WG 70). We quote amply from the passage:

> Not long afterwards I awoke in sudden terror. A dazzling full moon was rising from the sea. It is at this secret hour that the Moon-goddess, sole sovereign of mankind, is possessed of her greatest power and majesty. She is the shining deity by whose divine influence not only all beasts, wild and tame, but all inanimate things as well, are invigorated, whose ebbs and flows control the rhythm of all bodies whatsoever, whether in the air, on earth or below the sea...

> I had scarcely closed my eyes before the apparition of a woman began to rise from the middle of the sea with so lovely a face that the gods themselves would have fallen down in adoration of it. First the head, then the whole shining body gradually emerged and stood before me poised on the surface of the waves...
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> Her long thick hair fell in tapering ringlets on her lovely neck, and was crowned with an intricate chaplet in which was woven every kind of flower. Just above her brow shone a round disc, like a mirror, or like the bright face of the moon, which told me who she was. Vipers rising from the left-hand and right-hand partings of her hair supported this disc, with ears of corn bristling beside them. Her many-coloured robe was of finest linen; part glowing red and along the entire hem a woven bordure of flowers and fruit clung swaying in the breeze. She wore it slung across her body from the right hip to the left shoulder, where it was caught in a knot resembling the boss of a shield; but part of it hung in innumerable folds, the tasseled fringe quivering. It was embroidered with glittering stars on the hem and everywhere else, and in the middle beamed a full and fiery moon.
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> In her right hand she held a bronze rattle, of the sort used to frighten away the God of the Sirocco; its narrow rim was curved like a sword-belt and three little rods, which sang shrilly when she shook the handle, passed horizontally through it. A boat-shaped gold dish hung from her left hand, and along the upper surface of the handle writhed an asp with puffed throat and head raised ready to strike. On her divine feet were slippers of palm leaves.... (Apuleius 261-264)

The other Roman narrative masterpiece, although what has come to us is only a fragment, is *The Satyricon* of Petronius.

Embedded, as it were, in this novel (using the modern term broadly) is the following poem:

> All visibles obey my words. All this flowered world,
> at my command, must wilt, the saps run sluggish in the stems;
> they spring again as I give leave. These barren cliffs,
> at my bare word, must rivers spill, each crag a Nile.
> For me the sea falls still, the spanking waters hush;
> the winds of winter gentle at the passing of my feet.
> As I please the rivers flow. Dragons and tigers,
> like puppies, wag their tails and follow where I go,
> tamely at my feet. (Petronius 154)

This strikes us as possibly the most perfectly crystalline instance of personification ever written. In other words, the Goddess here, who speaks in the first-person, is figurative. She is Nature itself. But the figure of speech is a bit complex, for we have not only personification but quite a bit of hyperbole. Moreover, Petronius, whose genius was comic, frames the poem in a devilishly clever device and succeeds in raising the level of the poem above the conventionally romantic—giving it, that is, a toughness: the words are spoken by a character in the story who speaks on behalf of the Goddess; i.e. as her oracle, as it were, and who happens to be an old woman!

This tempts one to wonder if Petronius was satirizing even the idea of the Goddess. But there is another element in the poem that belies such an interpretation: its torrential, sweeping rhythm which wonderfully evokes the elemental and the two-fold, creative/ destructive aspect of Nature. The rhythm does not encourage us to laugh.

We qualify this statement by admitting that it is applied only to the translation; the most we can do is suspect or intuit that the translation, in this regard, is only being faithful to the original. Which brings us to the point we wish to emphasize above all about this poem and its author: Petronius' evocation of the Goddess is both knowing and powered by a true poet's natural feel for his material.

Thus we see how the Goddess is powerfully and knowingly described by two major poetic works of late antiquity. These were pagan poets, i.e. in a qualified sense pre-Axial, by which we mean they were closer to the Old Religion than to the Judeo-Christian, and had the Goddess consciously in mind as she had stepped full-grown from the Neolithic like, in a later age, Botticelli's Venus. Thereafter she was to survive only in the subconscious of poets, in varying degrees of authenticity. And not only the poets, as the following demonstrate:

The English novelist, J.G. Ballard, a current cult figure, makes her an African child-woman in *The Day of Creation*, his best novel to date. Here is that haunting, surreal work's short and lyrical final paragraph:

> I am waiting, but not for a plane. I am waiting for a strong-shouldered young woman, with a caustic eye, walking along the drained bed of the Mallory with a familiar jaunty stride. Sooner or later she will reappear, and I am certain that when she comes the Mallory will also return, and once again run the waters of its dream across the dust of a waiting heart. (Ballard 254)

Similarly the last paragraph of a European novel bears her unmistakable presence. This work is the masterpiece of a writer regarded by many as the best in science fiction Evidently we find her even there.

> Must I go on living here then, among the objects we both had touched, in the air she had breathed? In the name of what? In the hope of her return? I hoped for nothing. And yet I lived in expectation. Since she had gone, that was all that remained. I did not know what achievements, what mockery, even what tortures still awaited me. I knew nothing, and I

> persisted in the faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past. (Lem 211)

The great James Joyce, in his autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, paints her thus:

> A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long, slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and softhued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like featherings of soft white down. Her slateblue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face. She was alone and still, gazing out to sea, and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither; and a faint flame trembled on her cheek. (Joyce 176)

In *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce's third and final novel, she becomes Anna Livia Plurabelle whose last name, Graves recognized, is an allusion to the many-named, universal Goddess and therefore shows the mature Joyce to know her in a more than intuitional fashion. Graves, who had a bias for learned people

especially those with a solid classical training, evidently regarded Joyce as a true poet, and not just on the basis of Joyce's poems which made for very minor poetry. Graves said that one yardstick with which to approach poets is how authentically or faithfully they portray the Goddess.

But it is ridiculous to think that, in order to write a poem—in order to be a poet—all one has to do is fall in love and sing of the joy or the pain of being in love. To write a poem that reveals the Goddess is not an easy thing to do; that would be like saying all a man has to do in order to win the woman of his fancy is to declare his feelings to her. It may in fact be easier "to justify God's ways to man".

But of course the great love poems reveal the Goddess in an outright way. The scriptural *Song of Songs* is no exception.

The *Song of Songs* provides us with a very interesting example because people in fact are puzzled why what appears to be a perfectly profane poem of physical love is included in the Bible.

The Bible is an Axial product. But that is as far as the editing and the redacting goes—there is much in the good book that is very ancient, i.e. that goes back to oral tradition. The *Song of Songs* is an outstanding instance. Its authorship is traditionally ascribed to Solomon, but scholars maintain otherwise; it is so obviously much more ancient than that. The authoritative, scholarly view is that it has been handed down from a remote oral past.

The lyricism, as in all love lyrics or love poems in subsequent ages, centers on the delightful physical qualities of the opposite sex. What, indeed, is a thoroughly sensuous and sensual poem like this, the legomenon, one might say, of a fertility ritual so hated by the priests and prophets of Israel, doing in a place like the Bible? How does one explain its inclusion into the Scriptures? How did it elude the Axial editors and redactors, i.e. the religious leaders who had led Israel back

from the Babylonian Captivity sometime between 500 and 400 B.C.? And when in the first-century A.D. its canonicity became the subject of passionate controversy, why did Rabbi Aqivah defend it in words that were boldest hyperbole? "(T)he whole universe is not worth the day that book has been given to Israel because all the Ketoubim (Scriptures) are holy, but the *Song of Songs* is the most holy." (Suares 226)

The cabalist Suares from whom we have quoted is of the belief that these words were mysterious and could only mean that the Song of Songs is a cabalist text and possesses a secret, arcane meaning. We believe, on the other hand, that even if that were the truth, the literal level of the poem—the objective correlative, the tenor—is the secret of its great literary appeal (no matter what profound interpretation of Moby Dick a reader can come up with, the sheer physical adventure of the story is what primarily engages our attention as we read it). As a consequence, the more familiar, popular explanation offered by the authorities and experts—to wit, that the *Song of Songs* is allegorical—has little appeal to people who do not have a special religious orientation or special religious temperament. "These love songs got into the Bible because they were interpreted allegorically by the rabbis who established the Bible Canon, the lover being God, and the beloved, Israel" (Levine 162). Christianity took this interpretation as its own, only substituting, for God and Israel, its own terms Christ and Church.

But the allegorical interpretation, though different from the cabalistic, may nonetheless have an esoteric or mystical origin. We are thinking of two such orientations. First, there is the well-known fact that two Catholic mystics, St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila, described their mystical states of union with the divine in erotic imagery. The popular explanation for this phenomenon goes something like this: the mystical state of ecstatic union with the divine that these two saints frequently experienced cannot be rendered except in

imagery from the level of experience that most closely approximates the mystical ecstasy, namely the erotic. This means that the experience described in the ecstatic poems of St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa is not erotic at all; it is religious and mystical.

Second we have the phenomenon of Sufism. The Sufis are the Muslim mystics who were held in disfavor by orthodox Muslims. The Sufi experience can be summarized thus: they believed that God is experienced ecstatically, because they did. They were the drunk or intoxicated ones—drunk with God. The Persian poet, Rumi wrote: "Before garden, vine or grape were in the world/ Our soul was drunken with immortal wine." The Sufi poets described the experience of God in three fundamental images of intoxication: wine, dancing, and love—erotic love in which the beauty of the beloved is perceived as a theophany. Most traditional interpreters of Islam tell us that a Sufi poem that appears to be a celebration of the beloved is really a celebration of God. This calls to mind the traditional interpretation of the *Song of Songs* as an allegory that in reality describes the love between God and Israel (or between Christ and the Church), not between a man and a woman. But Robert Graves, in his introduction to Indrie Shah's book, *The Sufis*, cites an interesting incident from the life of the great Arabic Sufi, Ibn El-Arabi: "Ibn El-Arabi, summoned before an Islamic inquisition at Aleppo to defend himself against charges of nonconformity, pleaded that his poems were metaphorical, the basic message being God's perfection of man through divine love." This suggests a lively inversion of the popular explanation of Sufi poetry; that is, Sufi poets had to pretend that they were, allegorically or symbolically or metaphorically, writing about God, not about a human beloved. In other words, Ibn El-Arabi was really writing love poems in a manner no different from Robert Burns or Christopher Marlowe.

In truth, Ibn El-Arabi knew the Muse, and he appeared to have experienced a love that served as a model to Dante's

love for Beatrice. However, just as Dante's Beatrice became, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a symbol for the beatific vision, Arabi's beloved—whoever it was in biographical terms—also proved to have assumed, for El-Arabi, the dimensions of the transcendent. What we are saying here is that El-Arabi's Muse was a real, literal woman, but she also gave Arabi a glimpse of the divine in more than the metaphorical sense. Essentially, this is akin to, if we may recall, Eliade's concept of hierophany.

Which brings us full-circle to the goddess of Primal Religion and the poem in question—the *Song of Songs*. In the Sacred Marriage or hieros gamos, groom and bride catch a theophanic, or hierophanic, glimpse of the eternal in each other. We offer this as the true explanation or justification for why the *Song of Songs* was accepted as canonical or scriptural. It is a triumph of the primal vision. If it is true, as El-Arabi says, that "beauty is the theophany par excellence," then the Muse of the poets, even the non-mystical ones like Robert Burns or Christopher Marlowe or John Donne, is, pushed a degree or two further, a theophany.

from The Book of Theophanies
by Ibn El-Arabi (12th-century, Arabic)

Dearly beloved!
I have called you so often and you have not heard me.
I have shown myself to you so often and you have not seen me.
I have made myself fragrance so often, and you have not smelled me,
Savorous food, and you have not tasted me.
Why can you not reach me through the object you touch
Or breathe through sweet perfumes?
Why do you not see me? Why do you not hear me?
Why? Why? Why?

This is the Sufi idea that the divine or transcendent is in the things of this world that one delights in, e.g. the Muse or the beloved. Here the speaker is clearly the transcendent or the divine saying that He/She inheres in the things of this world that we grasp with our senses—hearing, sight, smell, taste, touch—and take pleasure in and love so much. It does invite comparison with the sensuousness of the *Song of Songs*, but with the difference that the mystical idea is stated or abstracted. There is a strong metaphysical feel to this poem, and it is therefore more frankly theological in intent. The mystical idea that stares us in the face is that God is revealed in the sensuous things that delight us, and that the sensuousness or delightfulness of these things is a manifestation of his love for us.

This mystical idea is expressed in another world scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

> The Bhagavad-Gita
> *(an excerpt from the Hindu scripture)*
>
> I am the fresh taste of the water, the radiance in
> moon and sun, the sound in the ether, the fragrance
> of earth, and the brilliance in fire. I am the reason of
> the reason-endowed, the splendor of splendid things,
> the strength of the strong.

This is nothing less than a rendition or demonstration of Eliade's idea of hierophany. As in the preceding poem, we are told that the divine or transcendent is in the things of this world as caught by our senses. The world as it appears to man through his senses is a theophany, to use the term of Corbin; a hierophany, to use that of Eliade. This thing is clear in either of the two poems just considered, and less consciously so in the *Song of Songs* which can give the impression of being innocently pagan or profane. Write imaginary gardens with real toads in

them, advised Marianne Moore; in the *Song of Songs,* we say yes—a sacred wedding with real lovers in it.

The quality of being "innocently pagan or profane" is to be found in all poems celebrating the love between man and woman. But, as in self-conscious Sufi poetry, this love is raised, quite naturally, to a symbolic or metaphorical level. The loved woman in a love poem becomes the Muse or the Goddess. This would then make love poetry, when it is true poetry, essentially religious, but "religious" in the primal sense. Consider the following classics which we do not have to reproduce here: "My Love Is Like A Red, Red Rose" by Robert Burns and "Come Live With Me And Be My Love" by Christopher Marlowe.

It is doubtful that either Burns or Marlowe intended the Muse in his poem to be a theophany, the way El-Arabi and Dante did. It is even open to doubt that they were conscious of any Muse-oriented poetics, as John Skelton of the 15th-century or Robert Graves of our day were. They came to the Muse or Goddess intuitively. But for this very reason, there is a purity in their lyricism, as shown by these poems, that makes their sensibility so primal.

Faust *(a one-line excerpt)*
by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Stay, thou art so fair!

Yet, the Goddess that all true poetry—not just love poetry—evokes is, in a given work, not always a literal woman. The object of the poet's address in this radiant single line by Goethe, for example, is a fleeting instant or moment, personified as the Goddess. In a previous chapter, we cited similar instance in the Biblical evocation of Wisdom as a frolicsome young girl who was the delight of the Lord when He created the world.

The amazing French boy genius, Arthur Rimbaud, did exactly the same thing in a prose poem. Daybreak is personified as the goddess.

Dawn
by Arthur Rimbaud *(French, late 19th-century)*

I embraced the summer dawn.
Nothing yet stirred on the face of the palaces. The water was dead. The shadows still camped in the woodland road. I walked, waking quick warm breaths; and gems looked on, and wings rose without a sound.

The first venture was, in a path already filled with fresh, pale gleams, a flower who told me her name.

I laughed at the blond wasserfall that tousled through the pines: on the silver summit I recognized the goddess.

Then, one by one, I lifted up her veils. In the lane, waving my arms. Across the plain, where I notified the cock. In the city, she fled among the steeples and the domes; and running like a beggar on the marble quays, I chased her.

Above the road near a laurel wood, I wrapped her up in her gathered veils, and I felt a little her immense body. Dawn and the child fell down at the edge of the wood.

Waking, it was noon.

The dawn is a dawn on the literal level and as such it is personified, as in Goethe's line, as the goddess. In this poem, the goddess appears to be the giver of all gifts, and whose essence is a mystery that, alas, he violated when he "lifted up her veils." This led to his Edenic fall, for she fled, and now he sees that without her, he is "a beggar." When he woke up, it is noon—this means that once the poetic trance is gone, one is back to drab, ordinary

reality. Without the goddess, without the intuitive sense of wonder and mystery that was so full at the dawn of time—when it is noon, i.e. all is reason and logic, without mythos, without the goddess, everything is arid wilderness.

Kay Selya
by Francisco Baltazar *(Filipino, 19th-century)*

Nasaan si Selyang ligaya ng dibdib?
Ang suyuan namin bakit di lumawig?
Nahan ang mga araw na ang isa niyang titig
Ang siyang buhay ko, kaluluwa't langit?

Where is Celia, heart's happiness?
Why did our love not prosper?
Where are the days when her
One look was my life, my soul, my heaven?

The departure or loss of the Goddess can be the literal loss of the beloved. The effect is essentially the same: a kind of death. We see this theme in this excerpt from our own Francisco Baltazar (Balagtas)—really far superior to Ben Jonson's "Song to Celia," which is cavalier by comparison. On account of the poem's intensity, which reaches and touches the mystical, the true comparison would be to the authentic lyricism exhibited by the Christopher Marlowe and Robert Burns poems just taken up. The Muse that is Selya, whom the I-persona, unabashedly Francisco Baltazar himself, was permanently separated from when he was unjustly, treacherously imprisoned, perfectly echoes John Donne's experience of the Muse as we find it in the following poem, one of his lesser known.

A Fever
by John Donne (English, 17th-century)

Oh do not die, for I shall hate
All women so, when thou art gone,

That thee I shall not celebrate,
When I remember, thou wast one.
But yet thou canst not die, I know
To leave this world behind, is death,
But when thou from this world wilt go,
Thou whole world vapors with thy breath.
Or if, when thou, the world's soul, goest,
It stay, t'is but thy carcasse then,
The fairest woman, but thy ghost,
But corrupt worms, the worthiest men.
O wrangling schools, that search what fire
Shall burn this world, had none the wit
Unto this knowledge to aspire,
That this her fever might be it?
And yet she cannot waste by this,
Nor long bear this torturing wrong,
These burning fits but meteors be,
Whose matter in thee is soon spent.
Thy beauty, and all parts, which are three,
Are unchangeable firmament.
Yet t'was of my mind, seizing thee,
Though it in thee cannot persevere.
For I had rather owner be
Of thee one hour, than all else ever.

Robert Graves' remark on the poem: "Donne worshipped the Goddess blindly in the person of the woman whom he made his Muse; so far unable to recall her outward appearance that all he could record of her was the image of his own love-possessed eye seen reflected in hers. In "A Fever" he calls her "the world's soul," for if she leaves him "the world is but her carcasse" (Graves WG 427).

Poets who are esoterically or theoretically in the know with regards to the idea of Muse poetry describe the Muse with a measure of self-consciousness. They are, in the true sense of the word, the initiates. Their work, as a consequence, have a deliberate, almost artificial neo-classic character no matter how faint. This need not be inevitable, of course. Consider the following:

from The White Goddess
by Robert Graves *(English, 20th-century)*

Not the faintest image. Worself I close my mind's eye
I might dream nothing.
What if I heard
Your name and it will ring no bell?
Stranger and stranger until I'd run
Into you and know of course
This must be why. Here
Is why. This face.
This sheer sight that leaves no trace.
This strangest thing
Now under the sun.
Green sap of Spring in the young wood a-stir
Will celebrate the Mountain Mother,
And every song-bird shout awhile for her;
But I am gifted, even in November
Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense
Of her nakedly worn magnificence
I forget cruelty and past betrayal,
Careless of where the next bright bolt may fall.

from Tiradores de Muerte
by Erwin E. Castillo (*Filipino*, 20th-century)

Her eyes are deep
onyx lakes in the midnight
where jasmines and the Three Marys
swoon away to swim.
Wild winds
delirious with flowers
make caravels of her blown hair.
For her elf-ear
they sing and the fine down
stirs between her breasts.
Her face is pale as a pearl from the South.
Her tongue, snake-quick, lights in my mouth.

Love in Talisay
by Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez (*Filipino*, 20th-century)

That's how I came to love you,
you are mine
though I pity the man that
cannot know his blindness
from his love. May you not blame
me, sweet Josephine, for putting you
in this terrible mess.
You call me Joe, and I for joy
tremble at your innocence
and what of it is left? You and I,
perhaps in abundance of knowing,
and also in revenge
God teased when our backs were
turned, in an absolute way
in your body I knew the guidings
of my dream.
Towards night, we would walk
streets away into the woods
for you are all my virtuous sisters
seeking me in vain.
I'm lost time and again in
illuminated roads.
The world owes you a hearing,
but my pen is late.
Josephine, we shall write no words,
but only walk in rain
so I may feel your breasts,
and kiss your feet
and in a blaze of madness wake
the buried spring.

Yet, to repeat, it is not as if to write of the Goddess or the Muse guarantees that the outcome will be authentic poetry. Even a major poet can fall flat on his face in the attempt, though

this will escape the attention of students of literature who have been trained to appreciate almost exclusively only the Apollonian qualities of poetry. Because we do not wish to go far afield in attempting to give an elaborate explanation of what Apollonian poetry means, we would only cite that aspect of it which is most relevant here. Apollonian poetry puts great emphasis on perfection of form in the external sense. It thus also emphasizes a poet's virtuoso abilities or technical skills. In a word, the Apollonian poet is a performer, a wizard whose essential quality is that he can write at will.

The Muse or the *duende* or the divinity (Graves' term and Lorca's and Plato's, respectively) can be missing. In which case the poem may appear to be enduring, but the success is limited to readership among students of literary history and teachers of literature—who, luckily for the Apollonian poet, can always be counted on to be there. Thus—we have such "immortal" love poems as Ben Jonson's "Song to Celia"; George Lord Byron's "She Walks in Beauty Like the Night"; Percy Bysshe Shelley's "The Indian Serenade"; Edgar Allan Poe's "To Helen." These poems appear to be Muse poems but in reality are not; they are Apollonian poems. What we have is rhetoric—an ersatz Muse poem. The poet has managed to display his talent or technical proficiency. But we have a lack of real feeling for the Muse. There is a certain cavalier attitude to Love, which it purportedly praises.

We submit the following to the reader's perusal:

X SIGHT

Strange is your facelessness when I try
To picture you. You don't jell,
Not the faintest image. Worse
If I close my mind's eye
I might dream nothing.
What if I heard

Your name and it will ring no bell?

Stranger and stranger until I'd run
Into you and know of course
This must be why. Here
Is why. This face.
This sheer sight that leaves no trace.
This strangest thing
Now under the sun.

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