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## APOLLONIUS RHODIUS IN THE MODERN LITERATURE: THE INTERPRETATION OF ROBERT GRAVES

### 1. The unsuccessful First Version

In the postscript to his novel "The Golden Fleece" Graves tells us the following:

"When he recited the poem or a part of it in the Muses` Hall, he was met with a storm of hissing, caterwauling and a storm of plates for writing. He went away relatively safe and sound, but was afraid of a public persecution, because his rival, the court poet Callimachus declared him a "abominable ibis"; and he decided to leave Alexandria for a time. After several years he returned and recited publicly the revised version which got ovations even from his former enemies; so that after the position of a curator of the Library was vacated, king Ptolemy naturally appointed him as the next curator.<sup>1</sup>

The original version is not preserved, but its defect hardly was a lack of sonority and fascination. More probably, relying on the support of the Alexandrian women, Apollonius revealed in his epic too honestly the humiliations of Zeus by the Moon Goddess: what provoked the anger of their husbands."

And a little after:

"The mysteries that were added to the ordinary Greek rites from the classical epoch, were nothing other than revelation of ancient religious secrets to people, who weren't expected to divulge them in order to cause a public

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<sup>1</sup> Graves freely retells the two short *Vitae Apollonii*, published in the edition of the Scholia (C. Wendel, Berlin, 1935). There we find no mention about hissing, caterwauling or plate throwing, but the rest is exact – the anonymous authors indeed say, that the Apollonius work at first was met negatively, but the second version was applauded (*Zlatnoto runo. Pohodat na argonavtite*, 504-505. See note 2).

scandal; and in these mysteries the object of worship was the Goddess Mother... I believe, that the chief error of Apollonius was that he recited in a public hall a version of the Golden Fleece's tale, based upon ancient sources; and that this version sounded to the initiated as a desecration of their most deeply cherished religious beliefs."<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The version of Graves

The novel of Graves, although captivating and written with a good sense of humour, contains at some places his view on the "real history" of the Greek Gods, expressed in a simple, straightforward and rather too prosaic way. These passages do not look like parts of a book of fiction. In them he declares, that the old, non-Achaean (and moreover non-Indo-European) population of Thessaly, and even of all Greece, named "pelasgoi" worshiped one supreme female deity – the "Triple Goddess" (or the "White Goddess") – in different persons and named her with different names. The first (and the more peaceful) Greeks, coming from North – the Ionians and the Aeolians (called Minyans as well) – joined this matriarchal cult.

But the Achaeans, who invaded the peninsula several centuries later, imposed by force the cult to the God-Father and Warrior. They reformed (in a council at Olympia, convoked especially for this purpose) the local religion, created the classic pantheon with six gods and six goddesses, proclaimed the Goddess sister and obedient wife of Zeus and began to pursue the people who persisted in their adherence to the old religion.<sup>3</sup>

Otherwise the novel gives us a detailed account of the expedition, where virtually all sources for the Argonauts have been taken into consideration. Graves mentions them in the postscript. Except Apollonius, we have the versions of Pindar, Apollodorus, Diodorus of Sicily and Valerius Flaccus – all of whom, although in different style and length, present the full story. Some separate episodes are poetically adapted by Euripides in the famous tragedy; there are Theocritus and Ovid too; lastly, the scarce (but important, regarding its early age) information, given by Herodotus. Of course, there are a number of sources of minor importance.

There is a passage in the postscript, concerning the temporal standpoint of the teller, on which I would like to draw your attention. On the p. 511 Graves says:

"I render the story of Argonauts in the form of a historical tale; and every author of history must clearly express his point of view in the time. In this

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<sup>2</sup> During the work on this paper I was using the Bulgarian translation of the "Fleece" – Robert Greivs, *Zlatnoto runo. Pohodat na argonavtite*, translation by I. Vaseva, Fakel, 1993. The reverse translation to English is mine, N.G.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. III, "The Rise of the Olympians", *Zlatnoto runo*, 40-50.

case it would be inappropriate to tell it in the style of the XIII cent. B.C. – this would mean to write using poetic pictograms. It would be equally inadequate to write it from a present day position, because then I would have been compelled to render the dialogues in an unsuitably contemporary style; besides, that would have hindered me to believe sincerely the story.

The only plausible decision was to depict the events from the viewpoint of an epoch, when the faith in the legend was still alive, but preserving the necessary critical objectivity; and with a clear, but, on the same time, serious literary expression. This is the reason for using in some places phrases like "till the present day", and "today". The last page will suggest to the historians, that "today" means "no later than 146 B.C.", when Lucius Mummius sacks Corinthos. This is the year, when Argo, put in the temple of Poseidon, disappears for ever – maybe reduced to a heap of splinters by the drunken Roman soldiers."

What the Graves' reader could add, is that the story seems to be told by somebody, who knows who are the "real" ones among the Greek Gods, although prefers to represent priests, clairvoyants and believing-in-gods heroes rather than the gods themselves. And their "real" relations are the ones Graves sees as a historian of mythology, a poet and perhaps a psychologist. The main point is the superiority of the female Goddess, whose power over the mankind is usurped by her rebellious son; but usurped not without her condescending consent.

### **3. "The White Goddess" as aesthetic and history-of-culture manifesto**

The information I got about Graves when working on this paper, made me suppose that the "The White Goddess" is his most popular non-poetic and non-fictional text.

I'll say several words about this book not only because the theory, presented in it, practically coincides with the views of the teller in the "Golden Fleece", but also because – as Graves himself tells us – the very idea of this long essay was born in the process of the work on the novel. This explains why the two books appear in a relatively short time: the first edition of the "Fleece" is in 1944, and this of the "Goddess" – in 1948.<sup>4</sup> In a concluding note, written for the edition from 1960 he tells the following:

"I am often asked how I took to write the "White Goddess". The history is as follows.

In 1944 in a village in Devonshire, when I fled from the present day by working on a historical novel of the Argonauts, my work suddenly was interrupted. An obsessing idea forced me to get involved in the study of a

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<sup>4</sup> See the biography of Graves by Dr. Ian Firla – <http://www.robertgraves.org/bio.php>

subject I still didn't know and didn't understand. I stopped to trace on the vast military map of the Black Sea (and with the help of mythographs) the course of the Argonauts ship, who sailed from the Bosphorus to Baku and back. Instead, I was thinking about the mysterious Battle of the Trees, which occurred in ancient Britain, and all night I couldn't find peace; and the next day too, so that my pen barely followed my thoughts. For three weeks I wrote a book in 70 thousand words...

I'm not a mystic and I always avoided involvement in witchcraft, spiritualistic séances and yoga exercises; I never listened to predictions, didn't believe in automatic writing and so on. I live a simple peasant kind of life in the circle of my family and of a large number of mentally healthy and intelligent friends. I do not belong to any religious cult or secret society or philosophical sect, and I also don't trust my historic intuition, if it couldn't be verified by the facts.

But working on the book on the Argonauts, I discovered that the White Goddess of mount Pelion becomes more and more important for my narrative... I, who suddenly fell under the power of the European White Goddess, wrote about her totems in the context of the Argonauts' story and plunged in the ancient secrets of her cult Wales, Ireland and all over the world.

When, immediately after the war, I returned to Majorca, I started working again on the book which I already called "The White Goddess", and wrote in more details about the Holy King as a divine victim of the Moon Goddess, keeping in mind that every poet, who honours his Muse, should somehow die for his Goddess whom he worships – just like the King died..."<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Graves and the new Western spirituality**

These facts I drew your attention on, give us reason to admit, that the story of the Golden Fleece whose largest version we owe to Apollonius, influenced the views of R. Graves as a poet and as a historian, and at the same time was artistically worked out by him on the ground of these same views. It seems, that the Graves' "Fleece" is expected to be read as the "real story" of the Argonauts, told from the viewpoint of an enlightened but at the same time initiated Greek author from the last centuries B.C.

Besides, "The Golden Fleece" is produced according to a conception for the ancient mythology and the western religion, which, as Graves suggests, is

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<sup>5</sup> This text, together with the full Russian translation of the "White Goddess" is available at <http://www.druids.celtica.ru/page.php?pagename=greivs>. Russian translation by L. Volodarskaja. The reverse English translation is mine.

founded largely on the mythological researches of J. G. Frazer.<sup>6</sup> They both belong to a tradition in the European humanities, whose representatives do not regard themselves as Christians, reject the Eurocentrism and work for the cultural emancipation of the East and in general of the non-Western world from the European (or Euro-American) domination. Lastly, they are people who oppose the spirit of the classical European academism and try to reconsider the role of the university in the Western societies and its claim to dominate the education and even the spiritual life of the West.

This tradition include and is supported by many influential non-academic intellectuals, among whom I would prefer to mention the English and American followers of Mme H. Blavatsky; a little earlier, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in Germany; and from the XVIII century – Voltaire.

The new that Graves is offering us, is that he writes a lot of poetry and thinks about himself mainly as a poet; that, secondly, in difference to Blavatsky, he doesn't pretend for possessing any exceptional spiritual abilities; and thirdly, what seems to me very important, he lived two terrible wars. Maybe exactly this experience gave him strong reason to doubt the alleged superiority of Western civilization and the truth of its main religion. But nevertheless he expresses a kind of religious hope. At the end of his conclusion to the "White Goddess" from 1960 he writes:

"The idea of a Creating Goddess was rejected by the Christian theologians almost two thousand years ago, and by the Jewish theologians even earlier. Most scientists, caring for their social comfort, worship God; but nevertheless I do not understand why a belief in the creation of the universe by a God-Father seems to them more scientific than the belief in the creation of this artificial system by a Goddess-Mother...

Since the source of creative power in poetry is not the scientific education, but the inspiration (no matter what the scientists would say), then why not name as its source the Lunar Muse, since in Europe this is the oldest and most common term defining the source of inspiration? According to the ancient tradition, the White Goddess appears through human beings – that could be a priestess, a prophetess, a queen mother. No poet, dedicated to the Muse, thinks about the Muse herself, but always thinks about the woman, in whom the Goddess at least partially is incarnated; just like an Apollonian poet

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<sup>6</sup> "Sir James Frazer was able to keep his beautiful rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge, until his death by carefully and methodically sailing all around his dangerous subject, as if charting the coastline of a forbidden island without actually committing himself to a declaration that it existed. What he was saying-not-saying was that Christian legend, dogma and ritual are the refinement of a great body of primitive and even barbarous beliefs, and that almost the only original element in Christianity is the personality of Jesus." ("The Whites Goddess", ch. XIII, cited also in the article "The White Goddess" in the English Wikipedia).

is unable to perform properly his function, if he doesn't live under the power of a monarchy or quasi-monarchy. But the poet, who really worships the Muse, is capable to distinguish between the Goddess as the supreme incarnation of power, glory, wisdom and female love from one hand, and the ordinary woman, whom the Goddess makes Her representative for a month, a year, seven years or perhaps more – from another hand. The Goddess is eternal, and perhaps he will know Her again through another woman.

Prophets like Moses, John the Baptist or Mohammed, speaking in the name of the male deity, say: "So said God!" I am not a prophet of the White Goddess and I'll never venture to utter: "So said Goddess!" But since poetry came to the world, the poets, who worship the Muse, usually speak with love: "In all the universe there is nobody above the Triple Goddess!"

### **5. A reader's impression**

At a certain place<sup>7</sup> Graves says, that a poet might be evaluated as such, taking into consideration the degree in which he is familiar with the Goddess and is able to depict "Her and Her island". And adds: "Shakespeare had known her and had been afraid of her."<sup>8</sup> As a reader of Graves I would dare to share, that even before the acquaintance with this book, I already was convinced that he is obsessed by a painful fear of the presence of a kind of woman. She is a woman, longing for power, who establishes a relationship with an influential man, dominates him and weaves intrigues against everybody else, hoping to rule through him. She does not love him, but uses him and is always ready to sacrifice him and to look for another, who would fit for the same purpose. Livia in "I, Claudius" is like that, Theodora and Antonina in "Count Velisarius" are like that, Ino, in the very beginning of the "Fleece" is like that. They are images of a woman, who exerts over the man the power, given to her from the Goddess and thus revenges for the subjugation, imposed on her by force and counter-naturally in the epoch of the old Achaeans. She is not a personification of the Muse, but of Hecate. Graves was afraid of this woman.

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<sup>7</sup> "The White Goddess", ch. I.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, ch. XXIV.