

## **Eco-Spiritual Reverence in the Poetry of Robert Graves**

By

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### **Abstract**

The relationship between man and nature had been a central concern in British Literature before it gained precedence in intellectual discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Robert Graves's poetry, eco-poetic paradigms of reverence have not been profoundly investigated. Therefore, this article highlights the eco-poetic perspectives inherent in Graves's response to nature with a particular emphasis on the pantheistic/spiritual dimensions of his ecology. Premised on the argument that although Graves's poetry is replete with humanist tendencies, his relationship with the natural environment is religious, the researcher borrows critical insights from eco-critical theories to sustain the discussion of Graves's representation of nature concerning human activity and goddess spirituality. The paper, thus, fosters the discourses for the sustainable management of the natural environment, which have gained global attention via platforms like the Paris Agreement and COP Conferences. The paper is subdivided into an introduction, three sections and a conclusion.

**Key words:** Ecology, Spirituality, Nature, Reverence

### **Introduction**

The relationship between man and nature had been a central concern in British Literature before it gained precedence in intellectual discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Robert Graves's poetry, eco-spiritual paradigms of reverence have not been profoundly investigated. Therefore, this article highlights the eco-spiritual perspectives inherent in Graves's response to nature with a particular emphasis on the pantheistic/spiritual dimensions of his ecology. Premised on the argument that although Graves's poetry is replete with humanist tendencies, his relationship with the natural environment is religious, the researcher borrows critical insights from eco-critical theories to sustain the discussion of Graves's representation of nature concerning human activity and Goddess spirituality.

In his assessment of the western attitude toward human relationship with the cosmos and with God, Bullock (1985: 16) ascertains that:

Western thought has treated man and the cosmos in three distinct modes. The first, the supernatural or the transcendental, has focused on God, treating man as part of the Divine Creation. A second, the natural or the scientific, has focused on nature and treats man as part of the natural order, like other organisms. The third, the humanistic, has focused on Man, and human experience as the starting point for man's knowledge of himself, of God and of Nature.

Bullock's assessment foregrounds the variations that characterise human relationships with nature. From his views, it is evident that spirituality intrudes into writers' ecological practice, be it religious or not. Besides, the scientific attitude towards the universe and the central position attributed to humans in nature have had questionable impacts on human destiny. Consequently, some poets, like Thomas Hardy, for example, questioned the place of God in nature; meanwhile, others like Graves replaced God with the Goddess, whose reverence necessitates the shift in ecological attitude that this study focuses on.

Graves's reverence of nature as both abode of the Goddess and as Goddess personified is a prerequisite to conservation/preservation. The increasing signs and fears of environmental challenges today foreshadow the collective quest to check hazards. To this effect, the series of COP (Conference of Parties) meetings that seek to assess global progress in the fight against climate change and related challenges advocated by the Paris Agreement, attest to growing concerns about these ecological crises. In the wake of such concerns, Graves's approach to such issues is worth highlighting as a call to order.

The paper is made up of an introduction, two sections and a conclusion. The first section, entitled "Conceptual, Contextual and Theoretical Perspectives," discusses concepts related to ecology and how they fit within the context of spirituality and theory. The second section, captioned "Eco-Spiritual Reverence", focuses on the core aspects relating

to the place of humanity in nature and the mystery of cosmic unity, as well as the perspectives of Graves's spirituality/religiosity. The conclusion summarises our arguments.

### **Conceptual, Contextual and Theoretical Perspectives**

This section highlights the concept of ecology, situating it within the framework of spirituality. It further discusses the relevance of eco-critical theories to the analysis of the poems selected for this study. To this effect, it is worth beginning by remarking that nature often features prominently in literary works with different functions (either as themes or characters). The link between humanity and nature has equally been explored by a good number of writers and critics. However, more attention still needs to be given to the ecological dimension because of the environmental hazards that plague society nowadays. In this light, Arigo (2014, "Notes") maintains that:

Innovative practices and ecological thinking/being/feeling combine to produce a site of resistance, of politics, of political resistance. Perhaps, given the postmodern world in which we live, a world in which we are fully aware of the interdependence of the body upon its world, for its health, a world that is now inextricable from the body, an ecopoetics is an inevitable outcome or byproduct: perhaps poetry as a practice is the best means of directly addressing an environment in crisis.

The views echoed in the quotation above emphasise the interdependence of people and the environment, which is a central concern in Graves's poetry. The poet lived and wrote in the past century, yet his experiences and concern with nature, though influenced by varying philosophical worldviews, offer avenues for the assessment of human relationships with nature in the present century. Hurley (2004) acknowledges that the discoveries in the geological and biological sciences in Victorian England necessitated a radical rethinking of humanity's position relative to its environment: its intimate relation to lower species; the role of the mere individual within the far more important history of the human species; human insignificance in a world that, according to geology, had existed

far longer than previously had been conceived and that, according to astronomy, occupied a place far more minuscule than previously had been conceived. This Darwinian perspective attempted to reformulate evolutionism as a sort of natural progressivism, whereby both living matter and human cultural institutions must inevitably evolve from simple to complex, from barbaric to civilised. Nonetheless, it can be said that humanity had come into existence through a “random combination of natural processes, and that Nature was ethically neutral and under no compulsion to privilege the human species. The human race could not assure itself of its stability and continuity, for like any other species, it could regress into “lower” forms as well as evolve into “higher” ones, or simply disappear from the face of the earth (1996: 57).

Graves’s ecological trajectory has affinity with the concept of deep ecology. Low and Tremayne (2001) specify that deep ecologists are critical of mere environmentalist reforms. Many find their inspiration in traditional societies and Eastern cultures in which they perceive interdependence between Nature and Culture. Their critique of Western culture centres on its anthropocentrism and the placing of humans in a superior position over other elements of nature. Some Deep Ecology thinkers criticise the Judeo-Christian religions and their anthropocentric worldviews.

Concern with spirituality is equally frequent in feminist writings on the environment. Mies and Shiva (1993) argue that sacredness is an inseparable part of everyday life and that the link between the ecological relevance of the emphasis on “spirituality” lies in the discovery of the sacredness of life, according to which life on earth can be preserved only if people again begin to perceive all life forms as sacred and respect them as such. Deep Ecology as a world-view has been described as profoundly religious. They underscore that sacredness in everyday life is evident in the things that surround us.

Graves's Goddess-oriented spirituality falls within the scope of the above postulation and finds justification in Goddess Feminist doctrines. As Raddeker (2014, "Goddess Remembered") puts it,

Radical and then cultural Feminism always contained some emphasis on women's intrinsic closeness to nature...In goddess spirituality, however, we not only find a vision of prehistoric 'goddess cultures' as harmonious socially and attuned to Nature and the environment; women's subjugation and environmental degradation are also seen as two sides of the same coin and, furthermore, both grounded in patriarchal religions.

The above excerpt makes it clear that what feeds the spirit and what feeds the body must be separated but preserved. Consequently, the relationship between humanity and the environment might be elaborated in spiritual terms. This situation accounts for "the revival of traditional beliefs and practices as the result of social stresses caused, in part, by the process of modernisation." Among these are the revival of Shamanism in Siberia as an opposing force to the dictates of the Soviet regime and the revival of religious fundamentalism in several parts of the world stemming from the perceived threat that modernity has brought to traditional systems ("Goddess Remembered"). By associating nature with women and decrying the reckless depletion of nature, Graves's poetics can be termed ecological even if the poems are, strictly speaking, not in the eco-poetic tradition. Our immediate concern will be to read the poems not only within the context of Graves's ecology but also from their goddess spiritual orientation.

The spiritual/religious dimension cannot be discussed without reference to Jung (1955), who underscores the spiritual interconnectivity of human consciousness. His theory of the collective unconscious harnesses inherited feelings, thoughts, and memories shared by all humanity and expressed as archetypes or primordial images and manifested symbolically in religions, myths, fairy tales, and fantasies. In this study, Graves's Goddess reverence through nature finds justification in Jung's

assertion that “if such a being exists, then it will be exalted over all temporal change.... It would have lived countless times over again the life of the individual, the family, the tribe, and the nation, and it will possess the living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering and decay.” (1955: 394-395) Jung’s concept gives room for the analysis of archetypal images and mythical symbols that form part of Graves’s spiritual consciousness.

### **Eco-spiritual reverence**

This section discusses the place that nature occupies in Graves’s poetry, as well as the awe it instils in those who seek solace in it, as well as the perspectives of Graves’s spirituality. The poet’s love for nature can be justified by the fact that nature symbolises the White Goddess, who is birth, death and rejuvenation. At the same time, it is her sanctuary. In this dimension, the poet’s reverence for nature is closely linked to that which Cameron (2009) valorises in his science fiction film entitled *Avatar*. The Na’vi, like the speakers in Graves’s Goddess poems, revere the tree that serves as a sanctuary to their Goddess, Eywa, who protects the balance of life. Before delving into analysis of Graves’s dimensions of reverence, it is worthy to observe that if to match his acts with his thoughts, Graves, like other nature poets such as Wordsworth, Hardy and Yeats, Graves, withdrew from the rustles and bustles of urban life in England to the natural calmness of a pastoral habitat. His reverence of nature is evident in the mysticism embodied in his nature poems. Radest (n.d.) apostrophises such mystery in the following words:

In that primitive naturalism, I detect a more pervasive and underlying theme. This place and space is my home in all its loveliness and fascination. It is all I have or need to have, and I enjoy it, am awed by it, fear it, am playful within it, am alternately serious and foolish about it. Beneath the grandeur of the sciences and of the arts, there is this essential connectedness to and appreciation of the world and the worldly, a connection shown bare and naked in moments of crisis and celebration.

Like the mystic, Graves is driven to find unity apart from earth and sky and fellow beings. Paradoxically, mysticism claims to sacrifice the world to gain the world, accepts alienation from what is to leap beyond the shadows to what is. Radest's assertions illuminate not only Graves's poetic mythology but equally the poet's ecological orientations. Radest's opinions are couched in the humanistic approach to nature and are likely not consistent with Graves's eco-spiritual dimension. However, reading a mystic's transcendence with a naturalistic eye still upholds strands of non-religious spirituality.

From another perspective, Low and Tremayne (2001) propose a more appealing orientation in the discussion of Graves's eco-spirituality. They contend that myths, rituals and spiritual beliefs and practices in different traditions include many references to measures taken by humans to conquer, appease, maintain or create a harmonious relationship with nature. To nurture and protect their relationship with their environment, societies have developed some belief systems which manifest themselves in the worship of gods, objects, monotheistic religions, and, more recently, a return to paganism, and revivals of shamanism and witchcraft. In this light, Graves's poetry responds to the needs of Anthropological literature, which demonstrates "that 'rituals, practices, beliefs and spiritual values are often adaptive responses (not consciously) to the ecological environment'. The concern for the environment is not, therefore, a phenomenon restricted to the last part of the Twentieth Century, but awareness of the global scale of the problem is obviously new" (2001: 1).

Graves's reverence for nature cannot be discussed without reference to the poet's relationship with the White Goddess. This relationship is evident in the poem "The White Goddess", which expresses the poet's submission to the authority of the goddess; hence, it will be viewed as the source of the poet's eco-poetic spirituality. The poet writes:

All saints revile her, and all sober men  
 Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean -  
 In scorn of which we sailed to find her  
 In distant regions likeliest to hold her  
 Whom we desired above all things to know,  
 Sister of the mirage and echo. (CP 428)

Graves's use of myth, especially those related to goddesses, foregrounds what Jackson (2001: 32) refers to as "Anthropomorphic projections of human social organisation onto animal life". To her, the act of peopling the world with gods and goddesses imposes the human onto nature, and since human social organisation rarely values men and women equally, it is not surprising to find reflections of this in religious representations. Contrary to Jackson's view, Graves's revival of goddesses as a move towards an alternative form of spirituality is contingent on his poetic art. Moreover, Graves's swerve can be analysed from the perspective of Cultural EcoFeminism. The latter hold a positive view of anthropomorphism and seek an "anthropomorphised spirituality through their goddess revivalism, and Earth worship, which is assumed to reliably indicate what are loosely referred to as matriarchal societies" (Jackson 2001: 32). The speaker cum Goddess worshipper, reaffirms that:

It was a virtue not to stay,  
 To go our headstrong and heroic way  
 Seeking her out at the volcano's head,  
 Among pack ice, or where the track had faded  
 Beyond the cavern of the seven sleepers:  
 Whose broad highbrow was white as any leper's,  
 Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips,  
 With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips. (CP 428)

These stanzas capture the poet's quest for fulfilment in goddess spirituality. The speaker acknowledges the difficulty of the search, which is akin to the mythical search for the Holy Grail. However, the surmounting desire undermines the difficulties. Graves's return to the goddess has universal repercussions, especially for feminists. Raddeker (2014) intimates that Goddess spirituality, which has become especially

strong in North America, is indebted to various inspirations from abroad. The growth of goddess worship before the 1970s had a British origin. Apart from neo-paganism and feminist 'Wicca' or witchcraft, goddess Feminism has drawn on other expressions of spiritual Feminism; and EcoFeminism as well. Today it still owes much to Second Wave radical Feminism and to its offshoot of cultural Feminism that was centred on building a 'woman-identified' culture – an obvious example being the embracement of woman-centred alternatives to patriarchal religion such as goddess worship and engaging in spiritual/'magical' rituals that are intended to valorise and empower women. Furthermore, Raddeker notes that “matriarchal societies of the prehistoric world ... regarded all parts of nature as interconnected aspects of a nurturing whole, the sacred Mother Earth” (2014: 74). Consequently, the absence of goddess imagery in Apollo-related poetics is conversely linked with a desacralized nature that arose with the view of god as Spirit around 2000 BC. This situation precipitated the decline of the goddess who became associated with Nature, and since then her values of spontaneity, feeling, instinct and intuition have been petering out. The patriarchal society gradually withdrew from nature and replaced the goddess with the god, and moved from identity with nature to dissociation from it.

The reference to Apollo's followers in the poem under discussion evokes Graves's regrets for the overthrow of the goddess in ancient Greek mythology. While Raddeker affirms that the discourse on a matriarchal or gynocentric prehistory extends back to the nineteenth century, she shows that the patriarchal dominance continued to be perpetrated during the Victorian Era. This is elaborated by Engels in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which, Raddeker says, set out to locate the origins of women's oppression so that ultimately it could be overcome under communism. For Engels, the subjugation of women followed the rise of property ownership and class hierarchies. To repossess the past,

therefore, Graves calls for a return to nature, symbolised by the White Goddess.

Graves firmly believed that the White Goddess was not only a convenient description for a particular creative force, but also a living reality, and he happily allows her to speak: either in dreams or, more normally, through the mouthpiece of one of her priestesses. For Graves also believed that, just as a scientist's expectations are said to determine to some extent the outcome of his experiments, so our conscious beliefs can act upon the substance of the universe and shape it. Therefore, he makes the White Goddess herself explain that "the power of a Goddess is circumscribed by the condition of her worshippers" (Graves 1995: 17-18).

Graves's reversion to Goddess worship has affinities with Feminism. While justifying the feminist rejection of God, Morrison (2015 "Statement") reminded a startled audience, as she accepted her Nobel Prize, that "theistic language is inherently oppressive". Therefore, it is no surprise that many feminists have proposed "returning" to some form of goddess faith and worship. In most cases, she notes, this is "inventing rather than returning, since patriarchal theisms were so assiduous in stamping out traces of that which they had displaced." Though Humanists might be tempted to argue that goddesses are no more plausible than gods, the new worship promotes non-violence and ecological sensitivity which represent a major step in the direction of more Humanistic conceptions of life.

The above view attests to Low's and Tremagne's (2001: 6) assertion that:

The inseparable links between humans, their environment, and spirituality is reflected in the practical aspects of daily life in various forms. Humans seem to share their habitat with spirits for a variety of purposes. They can seek relaxation in the locations where spirits live; they can use the forest as a source of livelihood but at the same time respect the fact that it is also the home of the spirits; or they can mediate between the 'wild' and the 'civilized', and transform nature to make it

fit for humans. In central Africa territorial cults are concerned with man's role as 'a transformer of and a recipient of his natural environment'.

The excerpt illustrates the strong ties between man and nature, which, most of the time, is religious. Reference to Central African cults is discernible in the drama of Cameroonian playwright, Butake (1999), the interaction between humanity and nature is apprehensible in the responses of the Lake God and the Earth Goddess, respectively. Indeed, the glorification of nature to Graves is a religious obligation, such that failure to perform or partake in this glorification is tantamount to punishment from the Goddess. He believes that Socrates was punished with a bad wife because he discarded nature, on the pretext that it had nothing to teach him.

In an attempt to assess the role of human beings in ecological dynamics, Bond (2012), posits that we seem to be busy destroying the earth, with thousands of species of animals and plants becoming extinct through the actions of humans. In addition, there is the phenomenon of global warming, where the planet is experiencing unprecedented heating. Bond (2012: 24) asserts that:

the sun is slowing heating up, and life counteracts this by taking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. The problem is now carbon dioxide is down to just 0.03% of the atmosphere. So it doesn't take a genius to work out that the planet will not be able to take much more CO<sub>2</sub> out the atmosphere if the sun continues to warm up.... Admittedly at present we are not doing well, in that we are heating up the planet through industrial pollution. Yet even this may be part of the plan. In that an environmental catastrophe caused by global warming may make us human beings realise the importance of looking after the planet.

The precarious situation of global warming can be contained if humans realise that they are part of the organic system embodied in the Goddess principle that Graves postulates. In this dimension, Bond argues against the use of technological power to destroy the Earth, which humans might

do through thoughtless and irresponsible action guided by a ruthless attitude of wanting to plunder and exploit the environment for our selfish gain. While acknowledging the power of the goddess, Bond sounds a hopeful note that “once we wake up to the fact that to damage and destroy the world is to also to destroy ourselves...we may change our attitude and use our science and technology to save Gaia instead of trying to attack her” (Bond 2012:24).

The mystery of cosmic oneness is discernible in “Sea-side”, a poem which captures the harmony between man and nature. In it, Graves points out that nature is wild and confusing, but in this wildness and confusion, man finds comfort. The speaker acknowledges this when he recounts:

Into a gentle wildness and confusion,  
Of here and there, one and everyone,  
Of windy sandhills by an unkempt sea,  
Came two and two in search of symmetry,  
Found symmetry of two in sea and sand,  
In left foot, right foot, left hand, right hand. (CP 308)

The strength of Graves’s argument lies in his apt choice of the sea as a suitable area that can act as a sanctuary for “two and two in search of symmetry”. As an archetypal symbol, the sea suggests rebirth or regeneration. In reality, Graves’s view translates into the numerous beach vacations that humans seek to relieve themselves of stressful conditions. Moreover, the poet considers the close relationship between “sea and sand” like the complementariness of “left foot, right foot” and “left hand, right hand, as a lesson for lovers. As Wordsworth urges man in “The tables Turned” to “come forth into the light of things/let nature be [his] teacher”, Graves too believes that the lovers can learn from nature (Wordsworth 1998: 580).

Graves’s poem “The Tyranny of Books” is a lucid illustration of his affiliation with nature and the repercussions of failing to sing nature’s praises. Conscious of this duty, the poet regrets that for quite some time, he has not played his role:

Spring passes, Summer's young,  
Yet mute has been my tongue.  
This is the seventh week  
I have not sung.  
And now I hear the verdant hillside speak  
Chiding me for this wrong  
That I have celebrated not in song  
The new come colour of her forded cheek  
The sap that inkly swells,  
The meadow grasses shooting strong  
Spring airs are pleasant and the day is long,  
The year is young,  
And yet I have not sung. (CP 737)

To underscore the importance of nature, Graves bestows the human ability of speaking on the hillside, which chides him for failure to glorify it. Moreover, he equates the hillside to a female when he uses the third-person feminine pronoun "her". This suggests beauty and evokes the poet's association of the Goddess with nature as in Hardy's "Discouragement". As the title suggests, books seem to play a tyrannical role because they absorb the poet's attention to the point where he fails in his obligation to nature. The poet admits that he has not been able to sing the praises of "The new come colour of her forded cheek" and "The sap that inkly swells,/The meadow grasses shooting strong."

Graves's attitude towards nature reflects White's view that, "there is a consensus... that no major religion can uncontroversially claim to be progressive on environmental and gender relations. There is often wide divergence between the tenets of any religion and the folk beliefs in which it is embodied, let alone the actual practice of its adherents." Second, even those Eastern philosophies and religions which appear to advocate holistic notions of interdependence or an inherent respect for nature and the environment have been exposed to ruthless exploitation by political leaders or abused by the poor who fight for survival. Third, the general belief that 'traditional' societies respect nature reflects a romantic and, at times, naïve view. The perception of nature in these societies is not necessarily one of harmony and peace. Beliefs and practices surrounding

the relationship between people and their environment, in many instances, are formed around conquering nature rather than a harmonious relationship with it. Nature is too frequently viewed as 'hostile' and 'threatening', such that its fearsome and unknown elements should therefore be tamed. The forest monks in Thailand can reside in the dangerous and wild forests inhabited by uncivilised tribal peoples, dangerous animals and malevolent spirits (White 1967).

Graves's dissatisfaction with books stems from the inelasticity of studying. He laments that books are so crammed with inexhaustible knowledge that they can mislead the poet. He fails in his obligation to nature:

For by my elbow lies a pile  
Of books, of stern insistent books  
Big, broad, stout books, Crammed full of knowledge. Though  
it looks  
As if I'd finish in a little while,  
Still grows the pile"  
The more I read the more they breed  
Books wed to books  
Bears bookish progeny that bids me heed,  
Denies my pen over the page to speed. (CP 737)

After regretting the effects of books and studying, the poet in this segment of the one-stanza poem does a mock human representation of books. They are personified with human attributes of being stout, wedding and breeding. This portrayal effectively contrasts them to nature, which possesses the sap of life that the poet yearns for. Confinement to books deprives the poet of the freedom that nature offers. Natural freedom is evident in the concluding lines in which the poet says:

Outside, the rooks  
Circle in air and mate and feed  
But I must read and read.  
Can I afford to find my books  
Only in running brooks? (CP 738)

True freedom is found in the movements of the birds, which mate and feed freely, but the poet must read and read. The question in the last

couplet reveals the poet's quest for fulfilment in nature. The speaker's worry is characteristic of Blake's and Wordsworth's dissatisfaction with books and studying. In "The School Boy," Blake shows that experience only leads to sadness and that societal laws are unfavourable to children. Rather than remain in class, the school boy is happy to join the blissful company of the singing skylark and other creatures in the morning. However, such a company is short-lived because the law holds that he should go to school. Going to school "drives all joy away" and "the little ones spend the day,/In sighing and dismay" (Blake 1988: 565).

Again, Graves's attitude towards books re-echoes Wordsworth's scepticism expressed in the poem "The Tables Turned": The latter maintained that "*Books! Tis dull and endless strife*" and called on humanity to "*Come forth into the light of things. /Let nature be your teacher*" (Wordsworth 1988: 580). To Wordsworth, concentration on books removes man from refreshing nature, thereby making man "grow double". For this reason, Wordsworth decried studying and advocated identification with nature because nature teaches.

The eco-religiosity of Graves's poems has eastern religious roots—Buddhist spirituality. This is suggested in Graves's statement that he hears "the verdant hillside speak, chiding him for having failed to celebrate in song." "The new come colour of her forded cheek," suggests that the poet specially communes with nature. Besides, the wish to learn from the "running brooks" expressed through the question that ends the poem, connects the poet with Buddhists' pantheistic perspectives of nature. This is in line with Noss's (1963: 183) view that

There is no sovereign Person in the heavens holding all together in unity, there is only the ultimate impersonal unity of being itself, whose peace enfolds the individual self when it ceases to call itself 'I' and dissolves in the featureless purity of Nirvana, as a drop of spray is merged in its mother sea.

The pantheistic perspective in Graves's case is not the search for a Christian God in nature. Rather, it is consistent with the poet's belief that

the white Goddess whom he reveres is nature personified. She is not out of nature as the Christian God is. Therefore, the books that the poet detests are symbolic of Apollo, the god of reason, who appropriates the place of the goddess. Apart from the Buddhist view, Graves's poetry has a Hindu spiritual orientation based on its ecological dispensation. In Taylor and Offner (1975) it is observed that in Hinduism, it is indeed difficult to untangle the ecological from the non-ecological when it is embedded within other cultural practices, and the perception of the natural world as sacred does not necessarily lead to a more 'environmental' or ecological attitude towards nature. On the other hand, the new idealisation of nature, reflected by some in the West, is encapsulated in new Paganism, which, to Harvey, is the religion of those who privilege the earth.

Nature's capacity to teach is a prime subject of reverence again in the poem "The Voice of Beauty Drowned." The persona bemoans the lack of understanding of nature's communication with humanity and urges the elements of nature, like birds, to sing unlimitedly, even in discordant chords:

'Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!  
The screams and hootings rose again:  
They gaped with raucous beaks, they whirred  
Their noisy plumage; small but plain  
The lonely hidden singer made  
A well of grief within the glade.  
'Whist, silly fool, be off,' they shout,  
'Or we'll come pluck your feathers out.'(CP68-9)

This poem illustrates the necessity of human interaction with nature as well as Graves's yearning for an environment that inspires creativity and offers spiritual healing. The isolated voice of his "heart's bird" is reminiscent of Hardy's "gaunt" thrush in "The Darkling Thrush" that chooses to fling its soul upon the gloomy environment. Graves's poem takes a conservative approach as the poet cautions those who do not appreciate the value of the bird's music but aspire to pluck out its

feathers. Among the birds cited in the poem are some species of parrots that, like the African parrot, are highly protected and marked as endangered species. The threat of plucking off the feathers of the “lonely bird” is a microcosm of the larger environmental hazards inflicted on the natural habitats of birds.

From a postmodernist humanist perspective, Chatlos (n.d.) opines that the failure to recognise the spiritual value of nature leads to a lack of self-fulfilment. He borrows from Nietzsche, whom he says declared that our malaise “comes from *not* recognizing our relationship to the spiritual-not a supernatural spirituality but a human, naturalistic spirituality. In its broadest perspective, this is more appropriately considered to be an Ecohumanist spirituality to emphasize our relationship to nature.” Besides, Chatlos notes that our historical identification of “spiritual” with “supernatural” has limited our ability to acknowledge a human, naturalistic spirituality. This recognition and liberation will occur only when we do violate (or deconstruct) our own self-projected non-spiritual experience of life. As a result, we must review our own life and historical experiences to form a new paradigm that identifies our own spiritual alienation or spiritual connectedness.

This process leads to a recognition of the spiritual attitude of "harmoniously adjusting to an unseen order" as a paradigm for healing[...]the healing of the suffering schisms to which our personal and historical experience and interpretations contribute. This attitude includes thinking and rationality-but as a belief connected with feeling to a visceral level of experience commonly referred to by the word "soul." This involves the continuum of head, heart and soul. (Chatlos n.d. :85)

To look further at the power of the spiritual attitude, one needs to consider Copernicus and Galileo. The nature of spirituality recognizes that we are not the physical centre of the universe, but we are the centre of our universe of experience. The “spirit” of humanity will last for the eternity of humanity, further opening a natural human definition of

spiritual experience and suggesting an “eternal” soul of a transpersonal but not supernatural source.

The scene in the following stanzas reveals that one can attain spiritual harmony in the natural world by barely participating in its drama. The speaker urges the bird of his heart to link its music to that of the outer world.

'Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!  
Slight and small the lovely cry  
Came trickling down, but no one heard;  
Parrot and cuckoo, crow, magpie,  
Jarred horrid notes, the jangling jay  
Ripped the fine threads of song away;  
For why should peeping chick aspire  
To challenge their loud woodland choir? (CP 68-69)

The poet's use of imagery, especially avian imagery, strongly communicates his ecological orientation. The three sets of birds mentioned in the poem convey the message of interdependence. The Parrot is a common name applied to any of about 340 species of brightly coloured birds that make up the parrot family. Groups of parrots that have their common names include the cockatoos, lorries, lovebirds, macaws, and parakeets. The cuckoo is a common name for birds of the large and diverse cuckoo family, found on every continent except Antarctica. The common cuckoo of Europe and Asia is the species whose two-note call has been invoked in many musical compositions as well as in cuckoo clocks. Lastly, the crow, the magpie and the “jay” belong to the same family—the crow family. The various families interact differently with nature and are collectively noted for their distinctive noises, which Graves capitalises on to create the boisterous atmosphere of the poem. Parrots, especially the African Grey Parrot, are gifted imitators of sound and depend largely on seeds, which, with fruit, are their principal food. While nature provides food and shelter to parrots, they can become a nuisance to humans. This is evident in a report that in the mid-20th century, imported parakeets became a problem as they bred and formed

colonies in several parts of the United States, leading to efforts to destroy the feral populations, as this species is known to be a serious pest in agricultural areas of its native habitat. From this example, one can understand Graves's choice of the parrot to participate in the noisy drama of the poem. Like the parrot, the cuckoo and the members of the crow family are omnivorous birds and their livelihood is sustained by natural habitat. Put together, the birds provide the enviable beauty that inspires the speaker's "heart's bird" to cry out:

Cried it so sweet, that unseen bird?  
Lovelier could no music be,  
Clearer than water, soft as curd,  
Fresh as the blossomed cherry tree.  
How sang the others all around?  
Piercing and harsh, a maddening sound,  
With 'Pretty Poll, Tuwit-tuwoo  
Peewit, Caw Caw, Cuckoo-Cuckoo.' (CP 69)

The boisterous atmosphere draws the listener's attention to evaluate the possible harmony that can be achieved through the diverse sounds of nature. Above all, the jangling discords of the outer world awake the soft cry of the unseen bird. The latter is the voice of the poet. Thus, Graves reveres nature because it inspires despite its awe. Structurally, the harmony in diversity is crafted into balanced eight-lined stanzas with regular rhyme schemes.

Graves's eco-poetic aesthetic is further manifested in the poem "The Unpenned Poem". In it, Graves appeals to reason to come to his aid because his imagination has failed him, and he has not been able to write a single rhyme for quite some time. He, therefore, cries out: "Approach me Rhyme; advise me, Reason" (CP 721). He goes on to announce that a poem may be blocked somewhere within him, anticipating reason to play its advisory role:

A poem may be trapped here suddenly,  
Trusting its adder's head among the leaves,  
Without reason or rhyme, dumb-  
Or if not dumb then with a single voice

Robbed of its chorus.

Here looms November. When last did I approach  
Paper with ink, pen and half truth?  
Advise me, Reason! (CP 721)

The eco-poetic orientation of the poem is discernible in that it is not just a created artefact, but one that assumes an organic feature. Like a seed that has been planted, the poem is ready to sprout. The natural element is made vibrant through the image of the adder's head. This metaphorical likeness between the shooting of the poem and "its adder's head" gives a sense of suddenness, thereby reinforcing the idea of intuitiveness. Though reason has an advisory position, it is evident that without intuition, the poem is "dumb" and "robbed of its chorus". Nancy Rosenfeld, in "Trees, Kings, and Muses: Robert Graves's 'Battle of the Trees' and Jotham's 'Parable of the Trees,'" throws light on Graves's relationship with plants by indicating that the poet's fascination with plants is in connection with his allegiance to the moon and folklore. Such interest arises from the fact that "plants, in common with man and the lower animals, possess the phenomena of life and death," which "naturally suggested in primitive times the notion of their having a similar kind of existence" (Rosenfeld 2005). Therefore, the idea of Graves's reverence for nature is consistent with a poetic practice that perceives the poem in terms of natural growth. This explains why he values intuitiveness.

### **Conclusion**

The analyses of selected poems in this paper have indicated that human relationship with nature preoccupied the poets of the 20th century through the lenses of Graves's representation which enhances the debate of the unity of the personality (mind, body, soul/spirit) as well as the pantheistic belief that God/Goddess exists in nature and, as such, the latter has to be revered. It demonstrated that the poet's notion of spirituality changed from the traditional/Christian-based theism to

Goddess religiosity, which necessitates the intensity in his reverence for nature. Cognizant of the dilemma of climate change in today's era of technological advancement, one can only consider Graves's poetry as a call to order. Such a call falls in line with Kennedy's (1963) postulation on the civic role of the poet/artist who, in faithfulness "to his personal vision of reality" serves as "the last champion of the individual and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state." Environmental policies today are seemingly at the mercy of multilateral bodies and their promoting governments, whose "intrusiveness" and "officiousness" have put to question concerted efforts against environmental challenges such as climate change.

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