

A Review of Daniel Deardorff's *The Other Within: The Genius of Deformity in Myth, Culture, and Psyche*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2004.

By Frank Kersnowski

Daniel Deardorff's study *The Other Within* tells of the possible role and value of the outsider to the community—if the outsider can first effect personal knowledge and healing. The outsider as here used means a person separated from the larger community by a deformity or trait that lacks general approval. A poet friend of mine once said to me that a poet was separated from the general community by a trait such as a stutter (his trait). Deardorff may well be thinking of his experience with polio. Yet such traits do not automatically, or often, lead to such understanding as my two examples illustrate. Robert Graves, cited often by Deardorff, is yet another example of the wounded man who finds knowledge. He was left for dead at the battle of the Somme in 1916 and became the paradigm of Deardorff's healer.

In Deardorff's view, or theory, the wounded man is separated from the community (the village) and through such isolation may well leave and venture into the unknown (the forest) to find there meanings suppressed or rejected by those committed to reason, progress, and to a predictable and stable village life: getting and spending as the poet said. Such creature comforts as result are not, by necessity, accompanied by spiritual knowledge or even knowledge of the self. The task of the outsider (the wanderer, the hunter, the poet, the wounded, the trickster) is to travel to the source of primitive identity and return with a metaphoric haunch of venison. Jung called such a progression "individuation," a venture into the unknown self and the bringing signs of that self to the consciousness. Clearly, such a quest involves danger: the imagination may not be able to accommodate such knowledge. Or as the Westerner said in *The Big Lubowski*: "Sometimes you eat the b'ar and sometimes the b'ar eats you".

Since Deardorff's wanderer is searching the imagination and the psyche, little chance of actual loss of blood from the b'ar exists. Yet he incorporates into his study a concern with traditional rituals of hunters, of primitive life. For some, the imaginative play of these rituals may actually produce an understanding of our mythic, or religious, origins not found by those who remain within the psychological safety of the village. Yet not all who are wounded reach, or desire, such understanding; the wounding is, at best, only an opportunity. Yet to venture into the actual forest, to hunt, to kill, to be part of a prehistoric ritual does not in itself bring such understanding.

I have hunted and had blood on my hands, have found myself lost in the moment of life and death and willing to accept either, yet pleased as well at the close of the hunt to wash the blood from my hands in the icy water of a box keeping the beer cold, to drink with friends and watch the sun set. As Deardorff summarizes from Sean Kane, though, the hunter may hear the unutterable music of the hunt but cannot afford to be consciously aware of it (150). I understood the music because I had long before been willing to separate myself from the security of the village in a search for other validation. But the act of hunting and killing cannot by itself bring such understanding. I remember a student of mine, a well-heeled young woman, proud of her family's possessions and prominence. When she was seven, she killed her first deer. Her father blooded her with the still warm blood of the deer by drawing a bloody cross on her forehead with his fingers. Since he would not let her wash it off, she had the embarrassment of going to her prestigious private school for a week before the cross flaked off. And I have known a warrior who became a poet, briefly, during his tours in Viet Nam. As Robert Graves observed, officers in battle often experienced poetry as a means of accepting the danger and possible death into which they put their

men. And there are as well at least as many officers as there are little blonde girls with bloody crosses on their heads who either never saw into the primitive self or were afraid to look.

So, too, all who venture into the psyche, in search of the primitive self, may never achieve either knowledge of the quest or “individuation”. Yet the dark night of the soul may be as intrinsic to their quest and knowledge of the self as any who have actually hunted or wandered. Ritual, as with life itself, cannot assure knowledge: only opportunity. Not being of those who attend religious services or participate in the imaginative/psychological play (in the sense that poetry is a serious kind of play), I cannot attest to the possibility that “imagination is not the faculty of forming images of reality, but rather ‘the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which sing reality’” (Deardorff quoting from Gaston Bachelard). But I do have an example of a poet whose life was changed by the experience of psychic, and actual, death and rebirth, so much so that his writings have informed the rituals and analyses of almost everyone who writes of such a quest: Robert Graves.

Robert Graves was a typical child and young man of his time, though a bit of an outsider: educated in the classics at a good public school, bound for Oxford, a ready and patriotic volunteer in World War I. He accepted the academic and Aristotelean reality determined by reason and predictability. Until he lived in the trenches, was left for dead at the Somme, and struggled with his “war neurosis,” post-traumatic stress disorder. Through conversations with W.H.R. Rivers, a psychologist who treated the psychologically wounded, he became an advocate of depth psychology, finding there a replacement for the lost life of reason and predictability. He wrote poems, and even critical studies, showing the value of his new study. In 1924 he experienced the divinity he would call the White Goddess and, thereafter, wrote of his spiritual reality in historical rather than psychological terms. His poem, “A History,” published in 1924 and not reprinted until the appearance of his collected poems chronicles the experience, the title signifying his changed view. The terror and helplessness of his life as a soldier became not a condition to be cured but was the sign of the Goddess’s presence in his life.

Daniel Deardorff’s book takes us through rituals that he may have looked for, or discovered, as a way of understanding his own experience, just as surely as Graves did in *The White Goddess*. As Graves’s prose in *The White Goddess* is often difficult, even tortured, so to Deardorff’s, as in this comment on the unutterable music of the hunt: “Maintaining decendedness, in this respect, is to submit to the ‘private storm,’ the visceral proprioceptive, and stereognostic intelligence and to enjoin the hyper-vigilance of the animal-body” (150). This language, with its origins perhaps in Jungian theory, may be the writer’s way to recreate an imaginative experience or to disguise an actual one, which is what I believe Graves did in *The White Goddess*. When I asked Graves’s daughter, Catherine, why her father never spoke openly of the reality of the Goddess, she replied: “He would have been thought mad”.