

## Calliope - A Timeline of Divine Inspiration in the Literary Canon

‘Where do you get your ideas from?’ To the timeless question Creative Writers are asked, I attempt an historical answer, based on both personal experience and professional expertise.

Contemporary theories of creativity do not mention divine inspiration. It isn’t ‘politically correct’ to suggest that the best stories are given to a few fated writers by God, that great plots and characters are bestowed on favoured authors by goddesses; that famous poems are already realised in a perfect form in some heavenly setting before a human hand puts pen to paper, chalk to slate or fingers to keyboard. Storytelling today relies more on subconscious processes, which sound scientific, but don’t get much closer to the origin of poetry, or identify the omniscient narrator whose voice every novelist must master. Here is what three modern muses of creative writing say about where the words come from:

In *Becoming a Writer* (1983) Dorothea Brande acknowledges ‘there is a sort of writers’ magic’ (p.25) but warns ‘the beginner may be waiting for the divine fire... to glow unmistakably, and may believe it can only be lighted by a fortuitous spark from above’ (p.29). Instead, new authors must ‘teach the unconscious to flow into the channel of writing’ which she advises to do by ‘hitching your unconscious mind to your writing arm’ (p.69). In this best-selling handbook since 1934, Brande’s key recommendation is ‘writing on schedule’ to channel that magical flow.

Heaven as a source of ideas is replaced by the head of the author; an equally mysterious, vaulted haunt of poems and stories waiting to be born. For Natalie Goldberg, too, another modern writing guru, inspiration is human, not divine. Her book *Writing Down The Bones* (1986) introduces a Buddhist method: ‘No writer, no paper, no pen, no thoughts. Only writing does writing...’ (p.12) In this meditation, we learn the etymology; inspiration literally means breathing:

‘And what great writers pass on is not so much their words, but they hand on their breath at their moments of inspiration. If you read a great poem aloud – for example, ‘To a Skylark’ by Percy Bysshe Shelley – and read it the way he punctuated it, you are breathing his inspired breath at the moment he wrote that poem. That breath was so powerful it can still be awakened in us over 150 years later... If you want to get high don’t drink whiskey; read Shakespeare, Tennyson, Keats, Neruda, Hopkins, Millay, Whitman aloud and let your body sing’ (p.51).

In fact, Goldberg’s breathless recommendation for new writers is ‘just keep your hand moving’; practical advice that coincides with Dorothea Brande’s timed writing sessions. A

third textbook, *Taking Reality by Surprise: Writing for Pleasure and Publication* (Sellers, 1991), also gives beginner's exercises that fixate on the blank page and the need to write, in timed slots, about anything.

'Start. Anywhere. Right. There is a little girl in a room. (Can you see her? Good. Go on...) Her mother is there, too ... There is a line of apricot-coloured powder gathering in the crease at the side of her nose... Wait a minute, haven't I read that somewhere? Am I sure that that's original...? Keep going. If it isn't your material, you won't be able to get very far with it. See where it leads...' (p.2) From the first words, this writing is subject to an inner dialogue, with voices both constructive and critical. If this is the unconscious answering back, it knows less about where the story starts than the oldest writers in the book seem to.

In the current creative writing syllabus, that is as close as we get to a lesson on the muse. For Goldberg, she's off the timetable altogether; not so much obsolete as obnoxious. When the author finished her first book, she felt 'used by the muse' on finding that 'suddenly I didn't know what the book was about. It didn't have anything to do with my life' (p.169).

All three teachers agree there is such a thing as inspiration, but it is only human. 'Learn to write about the ordinary,' Goldberg says. 'Give homage to old coffee cups, sparrows, city buses, thin ham sandwiches... Promise yourself, before you leave the earth, to mention everything on your list at least once in a poem [or] short story...' (p.100) This work is mortal, and she urges her readers not to get carried away when they write: 'You are not the poem... There is no permanent truth you can corner ... that will satisfy you forever. Don't identify too strongly with ... those black-and-white words. They are not you. They were a great moment going through you' (p. 33). Like Brande she hints at a channelling of ideas, but she doesn't say where they come from. Like Sellers she suggests that the writer may hear voices, but she doesn't say whose they are, beyond the still-breathing dead bards on her list; the prototype for my own literary timeline.

I can claim to have first-hand knowledge of divine inspiration. It is something I witnessed daily as an author of three previous, published works<sup>1</sup>. It was happening too often to ignore; one minute I'd be sitting, staring at an empty page, a blank screen, wondering what to write next. Then suddenly, the words were there; but so fast, whole sentences forming quicker than I usually think, with the promise of paragraphs unfolding perfectly behind them, if only my typing were quick enough to keep up with the sparkling stream.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dreamhouse* (1994), *Family Outing* (1996), *Lifestory* (2003)

Over hundreds of pages I watched dialogue come from nowhere, characters pop into my head fully grown, and miraculous solutions to narrative problems appear when I wasn't even thinking about them. Of course, I also brainstormed and did spider diagrams, scenarios and character profiles; the conscious drafting and crafting of a professional writer. But there were moments when I laughed or cried like any other first-time reader, surprised by the next line. My quest to find where those unplanned sentences sprung from started this research project.

In a recent novel, *Translating The Muses' Tale*, the mission becomes my heroine's: to meet the Muses.

“I made up a poem,” Alleysun bumbles, “but it seemed to come through me, not from me, in a stream whose source was higher than I could get. My writing overflowed from that font.”

“Divine inspiration,” Hazel agrees. She's scaled the mountainside to the place where ideas trickle from rock. “In the first verse of creation, the Muses watched over that spring. In the beginning, they were the word.

“Truth and wit piped from their celestial lips. They could sing wisdom, they could dance glory; they could whisper good ideas in pretty much any poet's ear. They're not all nice, don't get me wrong; it's not all sweetness and light. There is a muse of erotica, of war movies, of political thrillers; they like a little noir.”  
Habens, 2009, p.62]

‘Where do writers get their ideas?’ My serious aim here is to compile a reply based on primary evidence, the testament of the literary canon, whose witnesses are poets and philosophers and prophets, whose evidence is empirical. My creative writing experiments gave rise to a voice, repeatedly and recognisably different to my own; and the search is on for its owner(s). If there is a muse who dictated the best bits she will appear in this study of words scrawled across the pages of ages.

Metrical or mystical, the process of inspiration is described in famous poetry over the millennia. Magical or mechanical, it is debated in the prose accounts of great names along the literary timeline. All writers say ‘the muse is with me’ at moments when those words seem to come from nowhere, fast and flowing.

Madness and music have been the accompaniments to creativity since Mount Helicon days, when the nine Muses ruled at the Hippocrene spring, source of ideas for poets and philosophers alike. In ancient mythology, when Hermes first invented the lyre from a tortoiseshell, it had nine strings in honour of the Muses. The strings were made of gut from a cow Hermes had stolen from his brother; so he gave the fine instrument back to Apollo, who became ‘Musagetes’, chorus master of the goddesses of art and dance, writing and chanting.

Moved by the Greek myth, Roman poets gave audience to the same heavenly voices. An ode of Horace asks, ‘Do you hear her, or does an amiable delusion mock me?’ (1983, p. 134) Written a few years before the birth of Christ, he makes an important point on the literary timeline. Does the muse sing the same way to other authors, in different times and diverse places; and have I (on a minor scale) caught a murmur too? Is genius just the clarity with which a writer hears the voice(s) ‘from above’? My mad novel, with its ‘channelled’ plot and other-world characters, will need defending by this theory, if it can be proved.

‘Metrical mystical millennial magical mechanical musical maniacal meaningful’; let these buzzwords be my invocation to the mythical misses, the nine goddesses of creativity from classical culture, who might still whisper in the ears of writers today.

Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Horace; on a marble-hewn bookshelf near the start of the literary timeline are some mighty witnesses to divine inspiration. Most of them would never have started to write without an invocation to the Muses; a prayer, a prod, a plea for supernatural literary assistance to help find the perfect words for the job.

Herodotus, sometimes known as the father of history, sometimes the father of lies, had his work divided into nine books, each named after a muse. From book one (Clio) to book nine (Calliope), his *Histories of the Persian Invasions of Greece* in 490 and 480 BC are still split that way in publication today. By devoting the work to the Muses, an original editor says that none of it, story or history, was Herodotus’ invention. His chapter headings suggest all of it, fact and fiction, was informed by a higher source of wisdom.

Three centuries before that war, the first mention of nine muses in Greek literature is Homer’s *Odyssey*, book 24: ‘The nine muses were there, chanting your dirge in sweet antiphony, till not a dry eye was to be seen in all the Argive force, so poignant was the Muses’ song’ (1981, p. 352).<sup>2</sup>

Homer practiced what he preached, starting each of his epic poems with an invocation to the Muses. ‘Let us begin, goddess of song’, he says at the opening of the *Iliad*, acknowledging that he wasn’t going to narrate this epic tale single-handedly (1966, p.1). ‘Sing in me Muse, and through me tell the story,’ he says in the first lines of the *Odyssey*; implying that this masterpiece is merely channelled through him.

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<sup>2</sup> Agamemnon’s soul says this to Achilles’ soul in the meadow of Asphodel, in the final book of the *Odyssey*: ‘The Feud is Ended’.

‘This is the tale I pray the divine Muse to unfold to us. Begin it goddess at whatever point you will’ (1981, p.25). No claim of originality, no promise it was all his own work; Homer openly admits to plagiarising ideas from a higher source.

A hundred years later, the first lines of Hesiod’s *Theogony* feature an invocation that has been answered before the story begins: ‘The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing...’ (1973, p.24). When this book was written, around 700 BCE, there was little difference between art and religion. Hesiod got the idea for it when an angel appeared to him and whispered in his ear, in an often-painted annunciation scene from the pre-Christian era. His book is framed by the muse’s point-of-view; they tell it and they’re in it, narrators who draw attention to themselves in the opening and closing lines:

‘With the Heliconian Muses let us start  
Our song: they hold the great and godly mount  
They dance around the darkly bubbling spring  
... and plucked and gave a staff to me, a shoot  
Of blooming laurel, wonderful to see  
And breathed a sacred voice into my mouth  
With which to celebrate the things to come  
And things which were before. They ordered me  
To sing the race of blessed ones who live  
Forever, and to hymn the Muses first  
And at the end. No more delays, begin:’  
(1973, p.24)

In his channelled catalogue of planetary plots and stellar characters, the Muses’ song is the hum of the spheres; they sing things into existence. The creation myth is dictated by them; breathed into their beloved poet’s mouth, the very definition of inspiration.

Hesiod tells how, born of Zeus and the Titan Mnemosyne in a marriage that lasted nine days, the Muses discovered letters and invented language. They were portrayed in art, on walls and floors, as beautiful virgins; on vases and jars, adorned with wreaths of palm leaves, laurel, roses (and feathers that they won from the Sirens in a singing competition). Their mother, Mnemosyne, was goddess of memory and time, who represented the oral tradition, of tales preserved by word of mouth before there was writing.

But the stories were true, in a way; because the evidence was concrete. We know the nine were nursed by Eupheme, meaning ‘well spoken’, because her image was carved in a stone grotto, on the road to the grove of the Muses on mount Helikon; still cited in Greek guide books of the second century AD by the geographer Pausanias (Atsma, 2008a). The timeline ties fact and fiction together so tightly here, that you could actually walk along it and see where the story happened. Eupheme’s supporting role of ‘nurse’ gets a star in this golden-

age mile, showing how important the Muses were to society, in a world that still read its daily news in the stars.

Hyginus, writing around the year zero in our chronology, whose works *Fabulae* and *Astronomica* show a link between the stories and the stars too, mentions the son of the nurse, Crotus. Apparently, this young man ‘took his pleasure in the company of the Musae’; and was immortalised, for his pains, in the constellation we now call Sagittarius. The Latin author is serious about it: Crotus’ high-flying arrows, horse’s flanks and satyr’s tail were bestowed on him in heaven as tokens of the Muses’ appreciation (Atsma, 2008b). So far back as we can trace these stories, the signs suggest they were inscribed in the stars before they were written on papyrus or carved in stone. The Muses have been figures of fortune-telling, featuring in the tarot, from a time when tales came true (Ozaniec, 1998, pp.4-5).

Later known as the Aeonian Mount, when Milton’s *Paradise Lost* moved the pagan peaks to Puritanism, the Muses’ main home was Helicon. Here they guarded the Hippocrene spring, from which poets drank for inspiration. This was said to be horse-shoe shaped; set gushing from the rock where Pegasus stamped a hoof for joy at meeting his ecstatic hostesses, the Musae, for the first time. Down the mountainside, the town of Thespies held ‘Mouseai’ festivals every five years from the 6th century BC. The Thespians played host to poets and musicians from all over Greece, who competed in epic, rhapsodic or satiric poetry. A literary Olympic games, it hasn’t lasted as long as the javelin or gone as far as the discus; but art isn’t sport. The famous Museum of Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy I, was a temple dedicated to the Muses: this art was religion.

As well as their prize-winning promise to story tellers, the Muses played parts in stories of their own. They taught the sphinx her riddle <sup>3</sup>, lured unwanted suitors to their death from the top of towers <sup>4</sup>, and blinded any poet or singer who claimed to be a better musician than them.

In Hesiod’s day, a respectable author would have a shrine to his muse; a special relationship built with one of the nine, to whom he devoted all his work. And when the Muses were pleased with a poet it paid off in his writing, he assures us; ‘they pour sweet dew upon his tongue, and from his lips flow gracious words’ (1973, p. 26). The mothers of lies, maybe, the Muses speak in the opening lines of the *Theogony*, with some guidelines for writing fiction; ‘we know how to tell many lies that are like the truth, and we know, when we

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<sup>3</sup> What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening? Man!

<sup>4</sup> This was Pyreneus, King of Daulis, who tried to rape them before they flew away, in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, 5.27

wish, to speak the truth.’ Then he, for the first time in recorded literature, names the nine and outlines their different roles:

‘So sang the Muses of Olympus, Nine  
Daughters begotten by almighty Zeus,  
Cleio, Euterpe and Melpomene,  
Thalia, Erato and Terpsichore,  
Polymnia, Urania and most  
Important one of all, Calliope,  
For she attends upon respected lords.’  
(1973, p.25)

Fittingly, then, she heads up this chapter devoted to the ‘respected lords’ of the literary canon. As Calliope leads off along a timeline written first and foremost by male pens, it’s still not clear where she stands on the line between fact and fiction. How can her epistemological status be confirmed?

The Muses’ basic biographical details are learned in visions and trances, it seems. Robert Graves describes the state he wrote parts of his book *The White Goddess* in: ‘Then I threw my mind back in an analeptic trance. I found myself listening to a conversation in Latin, helped out with Greek, which I understood perfectly’ (1997, p. 334). Graves makes genius sound easy as he undertakes an intellectual time-travel that goes in two directions:

‘All original discoveries and inventions and musical and poetical composition are the result of proleptic thought – the anticipation, by means of a suspension of time, of a result that could not have been arrived at by inductive reasoning - and of what may be called analeptic thought, the recovery of lost events by the same suspension (1997, p. 334).

His theory of *The White Goddess*, written in 1948 by this esoteric process, follows the decline of an all-knowing female divinity with the rise of patriarchy. Calliope’s step on the literary timeline is slippery; Graves has to excuse his supernatural source of ideas.<sup>5</sup> In a chapter entitled ‘The Triple Muse’, he tells how a threesome, Melete (practice), Mneme (memory) and Aoede (song) were first brought to Helicon by the Boeotian people from Northern Thessaly. Then Apollo was put in charge of these pagan priestesses, taking them down from the mountain to Delphi, where he ‘tamed their wild frenzy, and led them in formal and decorous dances’ (Graves, 1992, p.79). The three devolved into nine, as their meditation

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<sup>5</sup> He says: ‘The proleptic or analeptic method of thought, though necessary to poets, physicians, historians and the rest, is so easily confused with mere guessing ... that few of them own to using it. However securely I buttress the argument of this book with quotations, citations and footnotes, the admission that I have made here of how it first came to me will debar it from consideration by orthodox scholars: though they cannot refute it, they dare not accept it’ (1997, p.339).

and chanting developed into new cultural practices; arts of satire and seduction, ever more sophisticated than the original faith. (In time, though, a Catholic church to the Holy Trinity was built on the site of the deserted shrine of the muse triad.)

Before that, the muses multiplied. Many of the nine were alleged to have children. Their most famous son was Orpheus; fathered by a King of Thrace on Calliope. He became the world's greatest singer/song-writer and everyone knew his talent was god-given; 'Apollo presented him with a lyre, and the Muses taught him its use' (p.111). Wild beasts were stilled, trees and rocks moved by the sound; and the god of the underworld let him take his wife back from the dead, so charmed was he by Orpheus' music.

And when he'd been set upon by the Maenads, and torn limb from limb, it was the Muses who picked up the pieces; burying Orpheus whole at the foot of Mount Olympus, except for the head, which was last seen floating downstream still singing of Eurydice and their broken hearts. In his *Complete Myths*, Robert Graves tells another version of Orpheus' death, in which 'Zeus killed him with a thunderbolt for divulging divine secrets' (p.113); and of another muse's son, Linus, who had previously been 'the greatest musician who had ever appeared among mankind, and jealous Apollo killed him' (p.575). Maybe these muse-son artists were too good; no human men could sing their way to Hades and back.

But with a muse for a mother, Orpheus gives them their best write up at any point on the literary timeline. He raves on the 'Daughters of Jove, dire-sounding and divine, renown'd Pierian, sweetly speaking Nine'; then pays each of his aunties some undivided attention for a moment in these lines:

'Clio, and Erato, who charms the sight, with thee Euterpe minist'ring delight: Thalia flourishing, Polymnia fam'd, Melpomene from skill in music nam'd: Terpsichore, Urania heav'nly bright, with thee who gav'st me to behold the light. Come, venerable, various, pow'rs divine, with fav'ring aspect on your mystics shine; Bring glorious, ardent, lovely, fam'd desire, and warm my bosom with your sacred fire' (Atsma, 2008c).

It wasn't just the fanciful poets who felt this way. Philosophers kept the faith too. Socrates classed 'possession by the Muses' as a divine madness like drunkenness, eroticism or dreaming. Any writer who wasn't in its grip couldn't hold pen to paper: 'he who, having no touch of the Muses' madness in his soul, thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art - he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted' (Plato, *Phaedrus*, n.d.).

Talent is god-given only; without that religious imperative we have no art. In Plato's *Ion*: 'The poets tell us, don't they, that the melodies they bring us are gathered from rills that



run with honey, out of glens and gardens of the Muses, and they bring them as the bees do honey, flying like the bees? And what they say is true, for a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired' (Burke, 1995. p.15).

Some writers would find this patronising, and for many it would be impractical; but Plato gives us both the myths and the maths behind creative writing. There's a report from Socrates on how grasshoppers were human once, in *Phaedrus*: 'And when the Muses came and song appeared they were ravished with delight; and singing always, never thought of eating and drinking, until at last in their forgetfulness they died. And now they live again in the grasshoppers; and this is the return which the Muses make to them - they neither hunger, nor thirst... and when they die they go and inform the Muses in heaven who honours them on earth' (Nehamas, 1995, p.52).

If this is fancy, Plato has a more matter-of-fact response for Ion, a poet and critic who only likes the work of Homer and nothing else. He describes a lodestone, with magnetic power, and a series of iron rings in its thrall. 'Just so the Muse. She first makes men inspired, and then through these inspired ones others share in the enthusiasm, and a chain is formed... (Burke, 1995, p.15) He explains that different loadstones attract different kinds of writers: 'One poet is suspended from one muse, another from another... and from these primary rings, the poets, others are in turn suspended, some attached to this one, some to that and are filled with inspiration, some by Orpheus, others by Museaeus. But the majority are possessed and held by Homer, and Ion, you are one of these, and are possessed by Homer' (p.17).

This accounts for Ion's lack of interest in any other poet's work, Plato suggests, in his vivid analogy of writers linked in chains of literary inheritance like strings of DNA. While poets have these genetic affinities to previous genius, Plato insists that most people are 'eu amousoi', an expression that means happily without the muses, in *Theaetetus* 176a (Jowett, 1968, p. 275). These are the ones who write our current Creative Writing textbooks without using the M-word.

So, the Muses' madness isn't for everyone but inspiration can still come with drunkenness or dreaming. Jacques Derrida joins the discussion with a key post-structuralist essay; Plato's Pharmacy. It's his 1972 answer to a passage in *Phaedrus*, a story told by Socrates; the god Theuth gives King Thamus the gift of writing as a medicine for wisdom and memory. The King rejects it as a poison, though; something that offers only false memory and the impression of wisdom. Derrida says, 'Writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that [God-the-] King approves of it... [God-] the King does not know how to write, but that

ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write. He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices' (Kamuf, ed. 1991, P.116) [Derrida's brackets].

The oral tradition dies hard, both poets and kings resisting the rise of writing. They were wise to; Derrida's long discourse in Plato's Pharmacy hangs on a twist of language. His deconstruction works because of two possible readings of the Greek word 'pharmakon', as both medicine and poison. Often pictured with their quills and pens, scrolls and slates, the Muses are guilty cheerleaders for literacy. But they hold all the trapping of the gods' pharmacy too. The tradition of the muses is steeped in substance abuse and addicted to stimulants.

Orpheus called his ode to them *The Fumigation from Frankincense*. The air around the Muses is smoky. In my own novel, I play (as some writers do) with the idea of smoking as an aid to inspiration. My fictional muses experience smoke as a spiritual lift:

'I've never smoked but have always wanted to. If I'm this enlightened as a plain priestess, how perfect would a mouthful of the almighty incense make me. How sweet would my Vespers be; 'imagine a sunset with yourself as the sun. Picture the Botticelli-beautiful clouds; pink, gold and breathtaking blue; but don't put them on a distant horizon. Let them surround you.'

I have heard it whispered that smoking can make singalos immortal. That's pretty strong stuff. And the whisperers themselves are addicted; never mind dancing in a circle while the clouds form songs and portentous stories. The muses are chain smokers. The poets are secondary smokers.

In our language the words for both Force and Source translate into yours as Holy Smoke.' [Habens, 2009, p.17]

Robert Graves agrees: 'Inspiration' may be the breathing-in by the poet of fumes from an intoxicating cauldron, the Awen of the cauldron of Cerridwen, containing probably a mash of barley, acorns, honey, bull's blood and such sacred herbs as ivy, hellebore and laurel, or mephitic fumes from an underground vent as at Delphi...' (1997, p.431) No stranger himself to a snifter, Graves describes how the muse priestesses used Mount Helicon's natural stimulants, such as the nine-leaved black hellebore and mind-altering plants like laurel, to fuel their incantatory cursings and blessings (1961, p. 386). But when the Muses as a feminine form of creativity were gradually tamed by patriarchy under the leadership of Apollo, God of reason, he prescribed 'nothing in excess' (p.392); and his followers wore laurel crowns without chewing the leaves.

The Muses may yet have held a pen in one hand and a smoke in the other; or perhaps a steaming mug. A measure of the herbal remedy for writer's block was always efficacious.

Probably the earliest reference to tea in English Literature is an ode to Charles II's new queen, Catherine of Braganza, by poet and politician Edmund Waller in 1663. She'd been gasping for a cuppa on arrival in Portsmouth from Portugal the previous year, and had found nothing forthcoming but warm beer. On becoming established at court she had quickly started a fad for the hot, wet lifeblood of polite society.

'The Muse's friend, tea doth our fancy aid,  
Regress those vapours which the head invade,  
And keep the palace of the soul serene,  
Fit on her birthday to salute the Queen.'  
(‘United Kingdom Tea Council’, n.d.)

Not quite ‘sibylline leaves’, but it puts the tea in creativity. Some students of the Muses admit to using a stronger friend to fuel their fancy, though. AE Houseman raises a glass in a similar salute, two hundred and thirty six years later:

‘Oh many a peer of England brews  
Livelier liquor than the Muse,  
And malt does more than Milton can  
To justify God's ways to man’.  
(1914, p.98)

This pastiche of *Paradise Lost* in rhyming couplets shifts the focus of divine inspiration from goddesses to glasses. Drunken poets have found their inspiration in spring water or wine; but blind poets have been visionary. The archetype, like Milton, of the blind singer starts in these muse-mouthed stories. A minstrel, Thamyris, who was taught by Linus, challenged the Muses to a musical contest; the agreement being if he won he would have his way with all of them. Mythology records that, of course, the Muses beat him; they invented singing and were simply the best. For his boast, Thamyris was bereft of both his eyes and his minstrelsy (Graves, 1960, p. 213).

A humbler genius is treated better by the goddesses of creativity. Homer, also blind, appears in a cameo role in his own *Odyssey*, as: ‘The excellent singer whom the Muse had loved greatly... She had deprived him of his sight, but she gave him the sweet singing art...’ (1981, p.123) There is a price for divine insight; note for note Homer pays the Muses for his vision.

So who are these nine lovely ladies, demanding thanks and praise from writers who get their ideas from the Hippocrene spring?

Calliope is the eldest and most distinguished of the Muses, identified with philosophy and epic poetry. Her emblems are stylus and wax tablets. Her name means 'Beautiful Voice'. In this first impression of her, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book V, she's a classical statue coming back to life: 'Then with ivy twining her neglected hair, Calliope began [the song], first of her group' . . . (Atsma, 2008d).

Clio is the Muse of historical and heroic poetry. Credited with introducing the Phoenician alphabet into Greece, her attribute is usually a parchment scroll. Her name means 'The Proclaimer'.

In my thesis, Clio is used to signify the sirens, sibyls and spinsters, all sister subjects of the muse; who wove stories when needles were used instead of pens. The spinning princesses of fairy tale, the embroidering heroines of Greek myth, make up another canon, of female voices in the oral tradition; to answer the male, literary mainstream view of where ideas come from.

Erato is the Muse of lyric poetry, of love and erotic poetry, of the romantic novel. For the ancient Greeks, she was also Goddess of mimicry; so perhaps even divinities sometimes fake their pleasure. Her name means 'The Lovely', and she is usually depicted with a lyre. Traditionally she turns those who follow her into men worthy of desire. We hear her voice in the modern 'Interval with Erato' by American poet, Scott Cairns:

'That's what I like best about you, Erato sighed in bed, that's why  
You've become one of my favourites and why you will always be so....  
I feel like singing when you do that, she said with more than a hint  
Of music already in her voice. So sing, I said...' (2002)

The next muse, Euterpe, is 'The Giver of Pleasure'; the one who offers music itself. She is pictured playing a double flute, her own invention. Devotions to this goddess are found at the crescendos of poetry, where the musical imagery of lute, lyre, even the Aeolian Harp, is used as a metaphor for divine inspiration by many Romantic writers, including Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, with their strong sense of the poet as instrument. It is taken up by Coleridge, who overblows it;

'And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,  
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweep  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze...'

(Coleridge, 1960, p. 102)

Melpomene is the Muse of tragedy. 'The Songstress' wears a tragic mask and *cothurnus*, the heavy boots of Greek tragedy actors. Her sorrowful chanting leads some sources to say she was mother of the sirens; half woman, half bird (the wrong halves) who lured sailors to their deaths by singing.

Polyhymnia is goddess of the sublime and sacred hymn. She is shown in a pensive pose without any props. Her name means 'Many Songs of Praise'. For my thesis, Polyhymnia sings a history of 'channelled writing' in the Christian tradition. I compare and contrast three tellings of the Jesus story: Kahlil Gibran's *Jesus, The Son of Man* (1928); Patience Worth's *The Sorry Tale* (1917) and Ann Rice's *Christ the Lord, Out of Egypt* (2005); written, in various states of inspiration, by a visionary poet, dictated by a dead one, or perspired over by the modern author.

Terpsichore is the Muse of dance. Surprisingly she is often shown seated, but her links with education imply she is a dance teacher rather than a performer. Like all muses, Terpsichore's pet artistes are those who pay homage to her; the human dancers and choreographers who worship the spirit of dance itself. She is invoked in 'An After Dinner Poem' of 1843, by Oliver Wendell Holmes<sup>6</sup>. Dedicating his iambic speech to her, the famous American poet begins:

'In narrowest girdle, O reluctant Muse,  
In closest frock and Cinderella shoes,  
Bound to the foot-lights for thy brief display,  
One zephyr step, and then dissolve away!'

Terpsichore grew bigger in the USA than Europe during the nineteenth century; taken up as muse of the mass entertainment industry. Ethel Barrymore helped to immortalize the goddess of show business, putting her name in lights with this line: 'For an actress to be a success, she must have the face of Venus, the brains of a Minerva, the grace of Terpsichore, the memory of a Macaulay, the figure of Juno, and the hide of a rhinoceros' (Belling, 2009). The modern American mix of mythology and biology pitched here, pitch up again later in the seminal work on Post-Modern dance, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Banes, 1987).

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<sup>6</sup> Read at the Annual Dinner of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge (Massachusetts) on August 24<sup>th</sup>.

Thalia rules over comedy and pastoral, merry and idyllic poetry. She favours country pursuits and is traditionally pictured holding a comic mask and a shepherd's staff. 'The Flourishing', she may also wield a tickling stick.

It is fun to trace the individual histories of this muse and Komos, the Greek god of comedy, to find them mated in the spring rites as Robin Hood and Maid Marion, to whom they are archetypally related.

Urania is muse of astronomy and astrology. Her symbolic object is a globe, her costume is a cloak embroidered with stars. 'The Heavenly' always looks skyward. But the same Oliver Wendell Holmes, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, middle-class, middle American poet gives a cosy picture in 'A Rhymed Lesson', of Urania at home; which he pinpoints as precisely as Warwickshire, England:

'...The nurse of poets feeds her winged brood  
By common firesides, on familiar food;  
In a low hamlet, by a narrow stream,  
Where bovine rustics used to doze and dream,  
She filled young William's fiery fancy full,  
While old John Shakespeare talked of beeves and wool!...'

The ultimate starry-eyed fantasy, Urania has a particular affinity with writers of science-fiction. As a professor of anatomy and physiology, Wendell Holmes was familiar with the scientific facts. He may even have been beloved by the muse of astronomy and astrology, though his first-hand knowledge of divine inspiration was infamously shaky. Recorded in his essay, 'Working of the Unconscious', he was roused from an ether-induced sleep with the answer to the meaning of life and all the mysteries of the universe on the tip of his tongue, grabbed a pen and wrote it down. When his head cleared he re-read the charmed lines, to find "A strong smell of turpentine prevails throughout" (2005). Still, the Hippocrene spring runs with other substances, and Holmes takes a stronger measure; 'Let others water every lusty line/ As Homer's heroes did their purple wine.'

Beyond the drink and drugs mentioned by other muse-lovers is a better way of getting 'out of this world'. Urania oversees female poets, from 17<sup>th</sup> century Amelia Lanyer and Margaret Cavendish, to contemporary Lavinia Greenlaw and Alice Oswald, writing on scientific themes (instead of the usual musings on marriage and motherhood that can characterise women's poetry). This feminist meditation concludes the litany of nine.

There have been many claims made for a 'tenth Muse'. In the University of Portsmouth library alone, three different books have this title, citing three different cultural practices

worthy of a spiritual mentor. Opera libretto (Smith, 1971), literary criticism (Read, 1957) and the peculiar psyche of the American poet (Gelpi, 1991) all make their bids for a Muse to call their own.

*The Common Muse* (De Sola Pinto & Rodway, 1965), *The Thinking Muse* (Allen & Young, 1989), *The Violent Muse* (Howlett & Mengham, 1994), *The Tragic Muse* (James, 1995), *The Industrial Muse* (Vicinus, 1974), *The Unembarrassed Muse* (Nye, 1970) and even *The Subsidized Muse* (Netzer, 1978) are further examples of works that use the Muse as a sort of shorthand for creativity in the face of social conditions. There's a rigour and a respectability in this application of the Muse theory to such an intellectual miscellany, though the half-century of thinking represented here is just a centimetre on the literary timeline.

In an essay entitled 'The Girl Who Succeeds the Muses', the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy shows how the religious art of the ancient Greeks became secular (1996, pp. 41-55). He uses Hegel, who said; 'Trust in the eternal laws of the gods has vanished, and the Oracles which pronounced on particular questions, are dumb. The statues are now cadavers from which the living soul has flown, just as hymns are words from which belief has gone... The works of the Muse now lack the power of the Spirit... They have become ... beautiful fruit already picked from the tree, which a friendly Fate has offered us, as a girl might set the fruit before us' (*The Phenomenology of Spirit* in Nancy, 1996, p.45).

Separated from the social conditions that created it, the art of antiquity now belongs in a *museum*; and the focus is on the curator, this girl who has a 'gleam in her self-conscious eye' (p. 46) and her gesture of offering. She gives us a piece of Homer, plucked from the living tree that grew it; preserved, beautiful but dead. In doing so, according to Nancy, she liberates art from the service of the gods. It is free to become artistic, to embody the thinking of a man. It precedes an idea of the divine, rather than proceeds from one. 'Hence,' Hegel says, 'the gods of the Greeks are products of human imagination or sculptured deities formed by human hands. They [are] produced by poets, by the Muse' (p.49). Though he calls on them, in this statement that surely deconstructs them too, we hear no more heavenly voices whispering stories in mortal ears. Inspiration is over.

But there is a twist. Art is not yet left without a God. It is merely on its way to becoming Christian; replacing the old Pantheon with Hegel's 'revealed religion'. Jean-Luc Nancy sees it like this: the girl with a gleam in her eye, the self-conscious curator of the museum, is Roman. She is leading us toward what he describes as a 'Christian moment'; the birth of self-consciousness. 'The brilliance of her eye,' he says, 'was lacking in the statues of Greece'. It's a modern wink he gives Hegel, who concurs: 'The supreme works of beautiful

sculpture are sightless, and their inner being does not look out of them ... But the God of romantic art appears seeing' (*Aesthetics* in Nancy, 1996, p.52).

Perhaps the paint that made those classical sculptures' eyes twinkle has washed off over the millennia, but Nancy's argument is bad for the Muses either way. Whether there are no gods, or one God, the many voices of the nine inspiring sisters are starting to fade. Robert Graves maps their conquest by Apollo in the rise of patriarchy; Nancy charts their demise in the face of Christianity.

Philosophy may have debunked the Muses but poets go on taking instruction from them. It is possible to trace their influence back through the history of literature; to find places where their voices are still heard loud and clear, and times when writers have to strain to catch the merest echo of their song. My main research method has been trawling anthologies of poetry, collections both chronological and conceptual, looking for mentions of the Muse. Sometimes she's referred to as a proper noun with a capital M, other times she an adjective or even a verb, with a lower-case m. Sometimes she's singular, sometimes she's plural; other times her siblings, the sirens and sibyls, prophets and the spirits of dead poets, stand for her in the great index of 'creatives' that predate and predict the literary canon. There are echoes of their speech in the syntax or style of descendants, down a long literary line:

Spenser, Sidney, The Earl of Surrey, Shakespeare; it might have been the Renaissance but was it a rebirth for the muse? Where do these four famous authors say they got their ideas from?

Conceivably, the Renaissance began at the Muses' finest moment in English literature. Tudor poet Sir Thomas Wyatt brought the Muses home to Eng.Lit. in these lines of 1536: 'But here I am in Kent and Christendom,/ Among the Muses where I read and rhyme' (Alexander, 2000, p. 83). Exiled from court, he found a heyday in the home counties for the nine goddesses of tale-telling from golden age Helicon. But fifty years later, there were signs of weakness in the ancient theory of creativity; that ideas come from Calliope, Clio, Erato and co.

In his *Complaints. Containing sundrie small Poemes of the Worlds Vanitie* published in 1591, Edmund Spenser wrote 'The Teares of the Muses'; a lament for the state of learning, for the poetic soul of modern people. It's a big Poeme, sung in the voices of the nine Muses, each a solo diatribe against the quality of men they were supposed to be inspiring: when 'all that els was wont to worke delight/ through the diuine infusion of their skill ... was turned



now to dismall heauinesse,/ was turned now to dreadfull vglinesse' (Osgood & Lotspeich, 1966, p.64).

The heavy, ugly writers of Spenser's day were hard for the Muses to get creative with, according to this epic complaint. 'Born of savage brood, /and hauing beene with Acorns alwaies fed' they were, perhaps, not sensitive enough to receive magical text messages such as his own *Faerie Queen*. Sent by Elizabeth I to the diplomatic splendour of an Irish castle, Spenser missed the courtly tradition with its classical roots. In the following verses, we recognise the scenery of a Greek myth:

'The sacred springs of horsefoot *Helicon*...  
Our pleasant groues, which planted were with paines,  
That with our musick wont so oft to ring,  
And arbors sweet, in which the Shepherds swains  
Were wont so oft their Pastoralls to sing,  
They haue cut downe, and all their pleasaunce mard,  
That now no pastorall is to bee hard.'  
(Osgood & Lotspeich, 1966, p.70)

An ecological note sounds here for a contemporary audience. The trees have been cut down, where the Muses whispered lyrics to their lusty shepherd singers. With no grottos or groves in which to worship the nature of art, Spenser suggests that a deforestation of the imagination is underway. From his isolated seat, he didn't see the emerald isle's richer tradition of poetry, or hear the Celtic bardagh sing. Still, the contrast between his pure *Castalion* spring water and the modern novel's 'troubled puddles' gives an environmental resonance, deeper than the superficial bitching in blank verse that *The Teares of the Muses* can be.

Poor punctuation, grammatical errors, limited vocabulary; Spenser is not specific about the literary deficiencies of his English subjects. They just didn't get what the Muses were trying to say. He has Erato tearfully tell her sisters: 'Now change your praises into piteous cries, And Eulogies turne into Elegies'. Maybe there was nothing worth singing about, in 1591, for Spenser; banished by his queen. Elizabeth I was muse for all the poets of her era, none could viably write with evoking her grace, none could publish without her blessing. Just as at the height of medieval poetry the only muse was the virgin Mary, now the only female figure of creativity invoked officially was the virgin queen.

She might have stood in for any poet's mother or mistress. These real life muses were always thinly veiled in the muslin folds of Helicon fashion, where goddess' faces blur as they

dance, blending with the features of any poet's wife or girlfriend. Reflecting in the Hippocrene spring, they provoke him to praise. Divine inspiration, refracted by this water, is just the devotions of human love, the distractions of lust.

Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, is supposed to have been based on a real life romance between himself (Phil) and Penelope Devereux (Alexander, 2000, p.91). He describes himself as 'great with child to speak ... biting my truant pen', as he writes these pregnant verses to his stellar lover, betrothed to another man. The poet himself takes advice from another woman, as his struggle comes to a painful climax: 'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart, and write.'

With this kind of creative counselling, art starts to be about the self. The itinerant singer who simply channelled the plot, typically blind as we have seen, suddenly gets a mirror. When Sidney died, Edmund Spenser wrote an elegy for him, called *Astrophel*, after his friend's autobiographical ego. A 'mournful muse' sings it in part; though again he is really writing about the mortal woman:

'Her he did loue, her he alone did honor,  
His thoughts, his rimes, his songs were all upon her.  
To her he vowd the seruice of his daies,  
On her he spent the riches of his wit:  
For her he made hymnes of immortall praise,  
Of onely her he sung, he thought, he writ.'  
(Osgood & Lotspeich, 1966, p.180)

Pen throbbing in hand, the poet's source of words is less celestial than the bard's of the oral tradition. His muse is not the object, but the objective here. Not worshipped so much as working, on both sides of the story, to translate the romantic fiction into fact. Many poems of this period were part courtship, their metaphors oozing pheromones. New creation myths begun in every line, a fertility ritual per verse; from the flirtatious lyric to the deeply committed sonnet. The female forms so vividly outlined here were no floaty Greek goddesses.

Earl of Surrey, Henry Howard, earlier in the sixteenth century, ejaculated; 'I know and can by roate the tale that I would tel/ But oft the wordes come furth awrie of him that loueth wel' (Siemens, 2001). The divine broadcast goes on, but in the service of a poet who just wants to chat up ladies of the court, the content may be earthy. 'Svche Waiward Waies Hath Loue', shows the passage from heart to tongue, from muse to mouth, twisted by the mores of contemporary mating.

At this point where the pen and the sword are both mighty reminders of the penis, the muse's appearance on the literary timeline is disappointing. In Shakespeare's sonnets, she is often mentioned, but always because of an unsatisfying performance. Here are two examples in which she is 'tongue-tied' and 'truant'. From Sonnet 85:

'My tongue-tied Muse in manners holds her still,  
While comments of your praise richly compiled  
Reserve their character with golden quill  
And precious phrase by all the Muses filed.'  
(1996, p.107)

And in Sonnet 101:

'O truant Muse, what shall be thy amends  
For thy neglect of truth in beauty dyed?  
Both truth and beauty on my love depends;  
So dost thou too, and therein dignified.  
Make answer, Muse!  
(p.126)

But there seems to be no reply. Courtly obligation has replaced divine inspiration. Perhaps under pressure to write flattering lyrics, the sonnets show our greatest writer in an unhappy relationship with the Muses that were only meant to bring joy.

Their other big mention by Shakespeare is in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, amongst the offerings of entertainment for Theseus' wedding. Reading from a playbill he cites '*the thrice-three Muses mourning for the death/ Of learning, late deceas'd in beggary*', before dismissing it thus; 'That is some satire, keen and critical,/ Not sorting with a nuptial ceremony' (Act V, Scene I, Line 52). Instead, the 'tragical mirth' of Pyramus and Thisbe is more the sort of thing the happy couples need. Audiences of this parody have cried with laughter for four hundred years but from this distance on the literary timeline it's not quite clear; when Shakespeare applies the term satire to our thrice-three, does he mean by them or about them? Do Calliope and Clio speak, keen and critical, in the 'play within a play' that we never ever get to see; or is the joke on Thalia and Melpomene? We can't be sure what the best bard in English literature made of the Muses.

In 1630, John Milton's first poem, 'On Shakespear', was published. The next generation poet was inspired to start writing, not by the Muses, but by the fame and spiritual

fortune of his cultural predecessor. It seems that he conceived Shakespeare's role more as an oracle, when he praises 'those delphick lines'; though it is mainly the immortality the playwright gained through his work that the young Milton admires; 'Thou in our wonder and astonishment/ Hast built thy self a live-long Monument' (Fowler, 1991, p.405).

Aside from this worship of a recent icon, Milton invokes the Muses routinely in his work. The way he addresses them, in 1667, is like Homer: 'Sing heavenly Muse,' he says at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*. 'I thence invoke thy aid to my adventurous song' (Darbishire, ed. 1958, p. 958). He shows utter trust in the unearthly word, but this in itself can lead to trouble. In *Lycidas*, his elegy for a drowned friend, Milton sets himself up as a channel for the voice of the Muse as usual; 'So may some gentle Muse/ With lucky words favour my destined urn (Fowler, 1991, p. 420).

But this self-image of the writer as an upturned container to catch stories in, changes when he starts to blame his narrative angels for the tragedy described: 'Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep/ Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?' Are the Muses really supposed to step in to the stories they inspire and save the day? For Milton it is a practical thing. He asks Calliope, whose pagan presence coexists easily enough on the page with his Christianity, why she didn't dive in and save the human boy from the fast-flowing Hebrus, out of respect for her own 'enchanted son', at least (Fowler, 1991, p.421)? It is a turning point on the literary timeline, with the muse made flesh by renaissance men, her spirit made physical by Albion poets.

Back at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Michael Drayton claimed: 'My Muse is rightly of the English Strain/ That cannot long one fashion entertain' (Fowler, 1991, p.37). Her recent fate had indeed been subject to courtly fancy and favour. But in 1606, he writes her a more universal and timeless fortune:

'In places far or near  
Or famous or obscure  
Where wholesome is the air  
Or where the most impure  
All times, and everywhere  
The Muse is still in ure.' (p.49)

Ubiquitous now, she becomes a thing of frills and formulae. No longer the holy image of creativity, or of poet's wives and mothers, the approach to her is more clumsy. In 1614, George Chapman derides 'Such men as sidelings ride the ambling Muse/ Whose saddle is as

frequent as the stews/ Whose raptures are in every pageant seen/ In every wassail rhyme and dancing green' (p.25) with rhyme as corny and imagery as chavvy as you like.

At the same time, the great Ben Jonson writes an epigram, inviting a friend to supper with the promise 'of partridge, pheasant, woodcock...' and more:

'Digestive cheese and fruit there sure will be;  
But that which most doth take my Muse and me  
Is a pure cup of rich Canary wine,  
Which is the Mermaid's now, but shall be mine;  
O which had Horace or Anacreon tasted,  
Their lives, as do their lines, till now had lasted.  
Tobacco, nectar, or the Thespian spring  
Are all but Luther's beer to this I sing.' (p.130)

Jonson's intimate, unknowable Muse must be the envy of all her sisters for the lavish appreciation of this poet; the literal richness of the feast they share. But as with Drayton, Ben Jonson writes differently about the source of his inspiration from poem to poem. His enthusiastic reference to the goddess of 1616 has become the lonely ramblings of an old soak by 1640:

'Are all the Aonian springs  
Dried up? Lies Thespia waste?  
Doth Clarius' harp want strings  
That not a nymph now sings?'  
(p.143)

Disillusioned, it may just be Jonson's own timeline talking, but John Donne agrees at this point; 'Love's not so pure and abstract as they used/ To say, which have no mistress but their Muse' (p.101). As the century goes on, there are more enlightened voices invoking her, like Abraham Cowley; 'Tell me, O Muse (for thou or none canst tell)/ The Mystic powers that in blest numbers dwell' (p.558). Then those numbers and that muse are put away abruptly by Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), in An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland:

'The forward youth that would appear  
Must now forsake his Muses dear  
Nor in the shadows sing  
His numbers languishing.  
Tis time to leave the books in dust  
And oil the unused armour's rust'

(Fowler, 1991, p. 593)

While each poet can speak so uniquely on the subject there is no real point in plotting a timeline of the muses' influence on verse. While the same poet can make two completely contrasting statements about where their ideas come from, there is little sense in a graph. Socio-political factors are probably the strongest, in the sliding fortunes of the mytheme muse.

Restoration writers' concerns are more civil, secular, social. Though Marvell flies his flag over Cromwell's army, other poets were starting to question, as Horace did more than a millennium earlier;

'Muse, where are you bound? Cease doggedly  
To report the debates of the Gods,  
To Trivialise great themes with little metres.' (1983, p.134)

But the fawning formula of mainstream poetry continues into the eighteenth century, with blank verse binding pagans and post-Puritans both into its shallow performance. Alexander Pope, in his satirical epic *The Dunciad* (from 1728), tells of a literary world taken over by the Goddess of Dulness, who 'leads captive the Sciences and silenceth the Muses' (Sutherland, 1965, p. 337). With her accomplices, superficial and vain, in train; she rules writing; 'But held in tenfold bonds the Muses lie,/ watche'd both by Envy and by Flattery's eye' (p.343). Pope slates the authors and critics who subscribe to Dulness, and worship the Dunces where they would once have danced round Orpheus;

'Or vest dull flattery in the sacred gown;  
Or give from fool to fool the laurel crown.  
And (last and worst) with all the cant of wit,  
Without the soul, the Muse's hypocrite.  
There marched the bard and blockhead, side by side.' (pp. 350-351)

Pope mocks many of the names on the timeline, in manic iambic pentameter; culminating in a parody of Milton's invocation from *Paradise Lost*, asking the Muse to relate the story only she has seen from the beginning. Milton was out of his time when he wrote, an anomaly on the line: and a hundred years later, well into the Enlightenment, Pope also bucks the trend when he says, 'No *public* Flame, nor *private*, dares to shine;/ nor *human* Spark is left, nor Glimpse *divine*!' (p.409) [His italics] At the point mankind allegedly starts to see the light; he concludes '*Art* after *Art* goes out, and all is Night' (p.407).

Consistently, in the canon, poets speak out of time, against all current thinking. James Percival's 'Ode to Music' is resolutely Orphic, while all about him the air of Reason turns into the mist of Romanticism. This eccentric American poet (1795 – 1854) kept the pagan goddesses of creativity alive in his retro hymn; each unctuous stanza devoted to one of the nine, declaiming her features, dedicated to her by name;

'But when, Calliope, thy loud harp rang -  
In Epic grandeur rose the lofty strain;  
The clash of arms, the trumpet's awful clang  
Mixed with the roar of conflict on the plain;  
The ardent warrior bade his coursers wheel,  
Trampling in dust the feeble and the brave,  
Destruction flashed upon his glittering steel,  
While round his brow encrimsoned laurels waved,  
And o'er him shrilly shrieked the demon of the grave.'

Like Orpheus, Percival's song takes us to hell and back; charming the king of the dead himself. It is poetry to make a warrior cry; this ardent one reappears in the last verse, pacified by the Muses and putting down his weapon, in an exact reversal of Marvell's 17<sup>th</sup> century call. It harks back to Hesiod, to a muse more immediate than the voice in his ear; the breathing in his voice. 'Descend, and with thy breath inspire my soul; /Descend, and o'er my lyre/ Diffuse thy living fire' (Devyn, 1999).

Through the smoke, it's not always easy to distinguish Orpheus from the Damsel with a Dulcimer from Coleridge's Kubla Khan. Famously drugged and dreaming when he got the idea for this poem in 1798, Coleridge had two forms of the divine madness listed by Socrates and linked to possession by the muses. All Romantic poets may show those symptoms, but don't always acknowledge their influence on the work. Because now, for the first time in writing history, an author could take full credit for his own creation. It was all his own idea; he really did make it up. Keats, Shelley, Byron never mention the Muse; if they had to name the mother of their invention it would be Nature.

But in William Blake's 'To the Muses' we see the 'fair nine, forsaking poetry'! The last verse goes;

'How have you left the ancient love  
That bards of old enjoyed in you!  
The languid strings do scarcely move!  
The sound is forced, the notes are few!'

(Bateson, ed., 1957, p.1)

This musical imagery swears that he is inspired, like Blake swears the era of the Muse is passed. The general consensus; Helicon ain't happening no more. Later, though, Robert Louis Stevenson's 'To the Muse' matches exactly the rhythm and rhyme of Blake's cynical ode from an earlier time, but makes no such trendy complaint. Stevenson's self-image is a monk, illuminating a manuscript, to describe himself writing patiently and piously all day long:

'Till last, when round the house we hear  
The evensong of birds  
One corner of blue heaven appears  
In our clear well of words.

Leave, leave it then, Muse of my heart!  
Sans finish and sans frame  
Leave unadorned by needless art  
The picture as it came.'  
(1906, p.181)

Stevenson gives us that sense of 'channelling' again; of words that come through the writer rather than originating within him. (Tale-tellers from Homer to Habens, the author of this piece, have already described a feature of the creative writing process whereby ideas seem to come from above and beyond the artistic self, with the feeling of 'divine inspiration'.) In another poem, though, Stevenson shows us that it isn't always so straightforward. 'Sing clearer, Muse, or evermore be still,/ Sing truer or no longer sing', he says, capturing the ambivalent relations of authorship (1906, p.41).

The dynamic has a sexual dimension, though all the cases studied so far have been between man and muse. If we want to know what women writers say about the nine Greek goddesses of inspiration, we don't need to go back to the beginning of the story<sup>7</sup>; we must only take one backwards step on the literary timeline to when their poetry was first seen (publicly), in the seventeenth century; that long period when the muse dances masked at many a courtly ball, her routine with male partners formalised to a fine art.

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<sup>7</sup> Born 615 BC in Lesbos, Sappho was often called the tenth muse, or something even stronger. In the book-length version of this thesis, she will feature more fully.



Margaret Cavendish (1623-73) mostly wrote about science; sonnets about the atom and the optic nerve, which were very ahead of her time. The one reference she seems to make to the muse is this mention in a feisty ode to her husband;

‘A *Poet* I am neither *borne*, nor bred,  
But to a *witty* Poet married:  
*Whose Braine* is *Fresh*, and *Pleasant*, as the Spring,  
Where *Fancies* grow, and where the *Muses* sing.  
There oft I leane my Head, and *list'ning* harke,  
To heare *his words* and all his *Fancies* mark;  
And from that *Garden Flowers* of *Fancies* take,  
Whereof a *Posie* up in *Verse* I make.  
Thus I, that have no *Garden* of mine owne,  
There gather *Flowers* that are *newly blowne*. (Cooley, 1998) [Poet's italics]

She took physics lessons from her husband, and the Duchess of Newcastle, whose *The Blazing World* (1666) was an early piece of science fiction, seems content to credit him with her creative skills too. She implies in this competent poem that William Cavendish hears the Muses, she doesn't; but with her head pressed to his can get enough inspiration second hand to pen a reasonable verse.

Three hundred years before feminism, it is impractical to hope for more authority from a woman writer. Women were not supposed to write at all; their stories were told as they sewed. An embroidered posie, in a tapestry of flowers, would have been a more likely pursuit for the wife of a Duke. No pens, only needles; no matter what the ladies said to each other as they stitched, they were not allowed to tell tales. For a seventeenth century poetess, the muses were marriage and maternity. And still at the end of the eighteenth century, in Hampstead, Anna Letitia Barbauld sets them a housewives agenda in blank verse:

‘The Muses are turned gossips; they have lost  
The buskined step, and clear high-sounding phrase,  
Language of gods. Come then, domestic Muse,  
In slipshod measure loosely prattling on ...  
Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded Washing-Day.’

Summoned to the mangle, the muse rolls up her sleeves, and squeezes herself out of women's poetry too. She has been, rather, sleeveless; her look more 'off-the-shoulder' in

classical representations, by men. But this poem is addressed to: ‘Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend’. The muse – by women, for women – is not pretty.<sup>8</sup>

There’s also a sneaking feeling, in women’s confessional poetry, that she might have been abused by the muse. Stevie Smith says, ‘I fear the Word, to speak or write it down / This fear has turned my joy into a frown’, in ‘The Word’, 1972 (Rees-Jones, Ed. 2005, p. 84). Poetry itself has become painful; the muse is madness. Sheila Wingfield’s whispering voices are her schizophrenic condition: ‘Bending my ear to catch/The oracle, at the same time it’s I,/ Fume-crazy croaking sibyl, who predict it’ (p. 89) Or the muse is an addiction; the female poet’s cigarettes, cider, compulsive behaviours. Like Derrida says, in *Plato’s Pharmacy*, though; the cure is also the cause. No spring water or circle dancing here.

By the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century on the literary timeline, women writers aren’t convinced by female embodiments of creativity, from the sibyl to the siren. Divine inspiration is likely to cause mental breakdown<sup>9</sup>, even for those, like Eavan Boland, who use the archetypal power of the oldest stories in the book:

‘My time of sixth sense and second sight  
When in the words I choose, the lines I write,  
They rise like visions and appear to me:

Women of work, of leisure, of the night,  
In stove-coloured silks, in lace, in nothing  
With crewel needles, with books, with wide open legs

Who fled the hot breath of the god pursuing,  
Who ran from the split hoof and the thick lips  
And fell and grieved and healed into myth,

into me in the evening at my desk...’  
(Rees-Jones, 2005, p. 223)

Before it falls into the me me me of certain female poetry, again, the visceral muse is not very attractive in her ‘stove-coloured silks’; but there are enough princesses in women’s writing to supply some more traditional allusions. Liz Lohead is to verse what Angela Carter

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Pitter’s piece of 1945 describes a: ‘Lightless, unholy, eldritch thing,/ Whose murky and erratic wing/ Swoops so sickeningly, and whose/ Aspect to the female Muse/ Is a demon’s made of stuff/ Like tattered, sooty waterproof...’ (Rees-Jones, ed. 2005, p.68) It’s a bat. The unusual turn Calliope does here is not redeemed by a transformation into beauty; she is ‘warm, clean, and lovely, though not fair.’

<sup>9</sup> Introducing Freda Downie’s collected works in 1995, George Szirtes says, ‘One may usefully think of the poems as a single drama of confrontation with the tragic muse. Downie was in many ways a muse poet in the Gravesian sense.... She also knew the goddess was dangerous: that she fed... on her depressions’ (Rees-Jones, 2005, p.144).

was to prose, with titles like ‘The Grim Sisters’ and ‘Rapunzstiltskin’ locating her work firmly as a postmodern fairytale (pp. 250-251). Similarly, Anne Sexton writes a twist on ‘Sleeping Beauty’, reclaiming its stake in the oral tradition, and her own place on the literary timeline (p. 132). And in her feminist paen, ‘Ourstory’, Carole Satyamurti turns the fantasy on its head; ‘Let us now praise women/with feet glass slippers wouldn’t fit’ (p. 199).

Even those recent women poets who just talk about men, matrimony and motherhood don’t mention the muse much. Other voices from the mountain-tops of myth figure instead, like the prophet Ezekial in ‘Oxford Booklicker’, from Gwyneth Lewis’ collection *Parables & Faxes*. Christianity has ousted the pagan personifications and the bard has replaced the muse priestess.

‘So the Lord said: ‘Eat this scroll.’  
I did and it was sweet and light and warm  
And filled my belly. But I didn’t speak  
For all His urgings. Tolstoy’s good  
And Kafta nourishing. I lick

The fat from all the books I can  
In the shops at lunchtime – Ovid, Byron, Keats...’  
(p. 354)

To this day, dead male writers are what give female poets their ideas. As Cavendish kissed her husband for inspiration, Lewis licks Ovid and the romantic poets, who translate the pure experience for poor girls. Anna Wickham, writing in 1915, agreed; ‘Of the dead poets I can make a synthesis,/And learn poetic form that in them is’ (p. 37). (She was lunching friends with Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence in real life Highgate.)

Contemporary with Cavendish and the cup of tea, Aphra Behn gives us these revealing lines from *On the Death of Edmund Waller*: ‘Hail, wondrous *Bard*, whose Heav’n-born *Genius* first/ My Infant *Muse*, and Blooming *Fancy* Nurst’ (Jokinen, 2006) [Poet’s italics]. In the language, almost, of ‘*Carry On*’ she suggests the fecund matings of inspiration. But in a critical essay, Wickham portrayed a creative relationship like this one, and Lord and Lady Cavendish’s, played out within the soul of every author, a marriage upon which the writing depends. ‘The female principle produces the myth from some source within herself, and fertilises it with her essential energy. The male principle is intellectual, ranging the world to select material. He is critic and scholar, and master of characterisation. He fertilises his wife from what he knows, and the result is a work of pure imagination’ (Rees-Jones, 2005, p. 37).

This deeply gendered theory suggests there's no muse without a bard; and, perhaps, both archetypes spring from the same Hippocrene source. Near the beginning of our story, just as Apollo gained control over the Muses and their art forms in the process of Patriarchy, so a male genius became the image of creativity in the literary canon. This may have started when Socrates inspired Plato inspired Aristotle, at the Academy of Athens; but is stated most clearly in Keats' ode of around 1819, with its invocation to the souls of dead writers, still giving literary advice from above (Cook, 1994, p. 146):

'Bards of Passion and of Mirth,  
Ye have left your souls on earth!  
Ye have souls in heaven too,  
Double-lived in regions new! (lines 36-40)

And the souls ye left behind you  
Teach us, here, the way to find you.' (lines 25-26)

It may be sexist, but the immortal bard is now in charge. The tone of the timeline is set by England's finest. As Ben Jonson wrote in 1623 – 'To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us' - '... I confess thy writings to be such/ As neither man nor Muse can praise too much' (Fowler, 1991, 149). For any enlightened gentleman to get his ideas from a group of half-clad chanting females would have been highly inappropriate. The Romantic mode is more about heavenly ink flowing through the pens of human males, living and deceased. If anything is 'channelled' it is their sap.

Blake writes more convincingly on the bard than the muses, too:

'Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Who past, present and future sees;  
Whose ears have heard  
The holy word  
That walked among the ancient trees.'  
(Kazin, 1946, p.99)

So, the role of poet emerges from the past as a primarily male one. In his own version of the history, Robert Graves suggests that 'poetry becomes academic and decays until the Muse chooses to reassert her power in what are called Romantic Revivals' (1961, p.393). But English bards never credit the muse; it's all about them. And when lady rhymers really get a look in, they don't do romance much either. Many modern women poets share the same fascination as Margaret Cavendish with scientific subjects. Mina Loy maintains the scientific

tone in her 1924 poem 'Gertrude Stein', calling her subject 'Curie/of the laboratory/of vocabulary' (Rees-Jones, 2005, p. 36). It's all about experiment and enlightenment, a practical act, when verse falls into female hands. Lavinia Greenlaw's 'Electricity' and 'Gallileo's Wife' (pp. 378-380) have the same easy relationship with physics, as Alice Oswald's 'Excursion to the Planet Mercury' has with astrophysics. But the Muses have always been too big for the microscope-gazers; too beautiful for the navel-gazers.

And they have survived the fall from the oral tradition into literacy, from one end of the timeline to the other; from Homer's epic invocation to the daughters of Zeus, in words he never saw on a page, to Selima Hill's evocation of Thoth, the Egyptian god who invented writing; 'He carries an ivory writing palette/in his long black fingers, to instruct/the scribes who squat before him on the sand...' (p.237) Self-consciously literary, and in full control of the language; perhaps for the modern woman poet the muse is something she can see in the mirror. The damsel with a dulcimer still there the next morning.

That female figure of inspiration writes in the sand, too. In Yeats' poem 'The Gift of Harun al-Rashid,' the hero's new wife sits bolt upright in bed at midnight and begins to talk. But;

'Was it she that spoke or some great Djinn?  
I say that a Djinn spoke. A livelong hour  
She seemed the learned man and I the child;  
Truths without father came, truths that no book  
Of all the uncounted books that I have read,  
Nor thought out of her mind or mine begot,  
Self-born, high-born, and solitary truths'...  
(Finneran, 1983, p. 445)

Except that these 'truths' sound the same as many other mediums, mystics and mummers at many points on the historical spectrum. The words do seem to come from some heavenly source, when they sound such resonance and echo in the illustrious company of other writers, who pen the same things but never meet, in this timeline of synchronicity. In 1923, Yeats chased that beautiful young woman as she left the bedchamber in a trance, and ran from the palace, to write Gnostic symbols with her finger in the desert sand. Muse or Mrs, the work pays homage to a creative partnership, involving channelled writing, which he famously had with his wife.

An extraordinary tale, but men's poetry is full of miraculous talking birds, like Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* (Rhys Jones, 1996, p.148); or midnight writing sessions, with angel and book of gold, like Leigh Hunt's *Abou Ben Adhem* (p. 60). The supernatural stands in completely for the psychoanalytical. The politics are unequivocal, though; if there is a way to silence the female voice, poetry will find it.

Oppressed by her editor's punctuation, Emily Dickinson kept all her work locked in a chest; hundreds of pieces, unpublished till she died in 1886. The oeuvre was going nowhere and it came from nowhere. Dickinson didn't seem to credit divine voices, and doesn't mention the Muses in her poetry. Nevertheless it is visionary:

'Omnipotence – had not a tongue  
His lisp - is lightning and the sun –  
His conversation – with the sea –  
“How shall you know?”  
Consult your eye!  
(Brown, n.d., p.1)

She brings us back to the key image of Jean-Luc Nancy's: an ocular sparkle at the moment of self-awareness. There is a polish on the windows of the soul that means, from now on, our creative writing can only reflect ourselves; a post-modern twinkle. The Helicon nine return, still spectacular, as 'your own way of looking at things' in 'When I Met My Muse', by William Stafford.

'I glanced at her and took my glasses  
off – they were still singing. They buzzed  
like a locust on the coffee table and then  
ceased.'  
(Mitchell, 2007)

The men Socrates introduced us to, turned into locusts by their love of the Muses, are singing in devotion today. Not the dusty papyrus of that original testimony, there is a 'webring' on the World Wide Web called *Circle of the Muses* (1997), an online community still worshipping them. Websites such as *The Muses Guild* and *The Olympian Foundation* give access to a database of popular wisdom; listing details of the Muses' names, attributes and areas of interest; logging diaries of the people who meet them in meditations, and channelled messages. A vivid example of their appearance in popular culture is a date with the Muse Erato blogged at <http://www.olympian-foundation.org/erato.htm>.

Beyond obscure internet practices, the Muses' last big mention was in 1980. Hollywood movie *Xanadu* features all nine, and one in particular; Thalia or Terpsichore, we never find out which. Played by Olivia Newton-John, in a vehicle following hot on the heels of *Grease*, the muse is a permed vision of creativity who convinces a standard unlikely hero to realise his dreams and open a 1940s/1980s cross-over roller disco. There's a price to pay for the muse, torn, mermaid-style, between the human love-interest and her heavenly orders to inspire him and leave. She returns to traditional father, Zeus, and disco-dancing sisters in this story; the last time the Muses are seen mainstream, wearing legwarmers.

Eclecticism clings to them, just as the chiffon of pre-Raphaelite representation did, or the hempen robes of their original priestesses. As well as the real poets our timeline has touched on, these mythical characters also bear witness to the broad church of Hippocrene inspiration: Thamyris, Theuth and Thamus, Thoth. A minstrel blinded for boasting he was better than the Muses. A blue baboon who invented writing. An ancient king, given the gift of written words, and refusing to accept it, out of fear.

There's still no proof of divine inspiration. And the timeline of the Muses' influence is neither straight nor linear. Once, an invocation to the muse was proper; then fashion put them in a series of polite disguises, learning to mock or mimic them till, by the modern period, their voices were barely heard. But though this seems to map a strong connection growing weaker over the centuries, each era has writers who tuned in to that constant creative broadcast, and writers who turned it off.

On my personal literary timeline, my earliest novels were written without knowing who the Muses were, or what the muse was. I did know, though, that sometimes I wrote without knowing what I was writing, or why; until the drafts' rough ends wove together with a sublime neatness, when the punchline came with an ingenuity I knew wasn't my own. Still no evidence for the heavenly voices; though the alternative explanation, that I'd subconsciously written the whole book already, speaks just as strongly for a supernatural act of creativity.

My research method has relied heavily on the definition of inspiration; not so much the breathing of dead poets' air, as the inhaling of sibyl's fumes or muses' mountain herbs. Smoking, in other words. The possibility that it makes a difference to the creative process is considered at the climax of my novel, *Translating the Muse's Tale*. The omniscient narrator sends the idea for this story to the writer at its heart; and sees it kick-started by a cigarette and a cough.

"She's... self-smoking!" I don't know how else to translate it, this trick of making a small amount of holy smoke for your own personal use.

We all watch as she inhales deeply, and blows out a ring of smoke which hangs like an idea in the air above her head.

"That's it!" says Alleysun.

The far away look in the earth girl's eyes seems to come into focus, with a sharp click like the button being pressed. She reaches out to her human keyboard, where rows of letters wait stiff and expressionless, and starts to type.

"It's worked," says Sighman, as we see her fingers moving mechanically over her computer keys. "She's writing."

Between puffs on her self-smoking stick, Alison starts to tell this story. Her eyes flick over the words that appear on the glowing screen, her lips flutter with smiles, her brow with frowns.

Another cloud of Holy Smoke wafts over me. The song of the proper people has reached a high point; it can go no further, the tune must turn around. We are no longer singing it, it is singing us.' [Habens, 2009, p. 254]

They have met the Muses, in fact, so are closer to the source of creation. In my fiction, it's not just ciggies either: the three times three, goddesses of creativity, are 'buzzing like bees on cocaine, glowing like sunbeams on ecstasy'. Of course, they didn't really use those drugs. Robert Graves suggests that it was, rather, 'the slimy vaginal issue of a mare in heat and the black membrane, or hippomanes, cut from the forehead of a new-born colt' (1961, p.386), that got the original Muses started.

My fictional character goes on a day trip to ancient Helicon and joins in the dancing circle of nine, the ennead of muses, on the mountainside. Her report, to conclude, is first-person, if not first-hand:

'I wish I could say that one was black and one was fat and one had only one leg. I'd like to point out the lesbian, the single mother, the one with a tribal tattoo; but the look is plain European. Their dance is the curve of croissants, pasta twists, spinning pizza bases. It folds like triangular Greek pastries; crinkles into walnut shells. It is the whirl of caramel, the swirl of brown sugar in a café au lait. Subtle shades from toffee to coffee, tan to *pain* make up the colour palate of the Muses.

Where they differ is their ages. One is just a teenager, and one is in her twenties; there's a thirty-something, forty-something and fifty-something Muse, all dancing in the circle. As they turn about it almost seems each goddess grows older before our eyes; the seventy, eighty and ninety year-old Muses wear the same translucent togas; and the flowers in their hair are still as fresh. Even the geriatric ones have Adriatic blue eyes.

As their roundel slowly turns about me, young to old, it suddenly seems like the Muses aren't dancing but standing still as the years tread a measure over them.' [Habens, 2009, p.159]

So there is a circle at the end of the timeline; and those who dance in it have started to look 'samey'. If that is the source of writers' ideas, it has become a homogenised spring; a universal cream, a vanilla art. But I will get closer to it in my essay to Clio (click her button!)



and find a complex web of inspirations from the Muses' sister-subjects; the Sibyls, the Sirens and the Sphinx, timeless spinners of a female tale.

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