THE WHITE GODDESS

The reason I was in that
out-of-the-way little village in Majorca
one Mediterranean midday was
a book bought not long before
in the Columbia University bookshop
in New York: *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves
which is about nothing less than
the discovery of a goddess.

He proves with devastating erudition
that in pagan and still matriarchal Europe
there was only one great goddess whom
all the peoples worshipped. A mother
goddess with a son also god. Goddess
of virginity and procreation, fertility
and death, love and terror, of heaven
and hell. With the later establishment of the Asian
patriarchy, the god her first son, and many other
subsequent gods, took the place of the goddess.
But belief in her never entirely disappeared.
It endured in the countless myths, legends and
superstitions of all the peoples, which persist
to this day. Venus, Diana, the Graces,
the Muses, nymphs, sirens, Circe, are
fragments of the Great Goddess myth. The
tales of sorcery and witches everywhere,
women who appear in the night to destroy men,
the spider woman, the woman who sucks men's
blood and whose embrace is death…The Goddess
always has the same physical appearance according to Graves:
white, beautiful and slim, pale, pointed
nose, long and beautiful hair, lips
bright red and light blue eyes. Botticelli painted her
exactly in the *Birth of Venus*, says Graves.
Shakespeare knew and feared her, and she is Keats's
Belle Dame Sans Merci. Death
which confers poetic immortality.

—Ernesto Cardinal

Ernesto Cardinal (born 1925), a Nicaraguan poet and theologian, has won numerous prizes in the Latin world for his poems. The excerpt printed here is the opening 36 lines of a long poem, translated by John Lyons, which remembers a youthful visit to the English poet Robert Graves on the island of Mallorca. Graves had published a monumental study of European goddesses who, he noted, shared many characteristics. His composite portrait he termed the White Goddess.