

## Robert Graves at Troy, Marathon, and the End of Sandy Road

### *War Poems at a Classical Distance?*

Tom Palaima

In 1941 Robert Graves was asked, ‘as a “poet of the last war”’, to comment on the poetry that was being written during World War II.<sup>1</sup> Graves rightly pointed out that the terms ‘war poet’ and ‘war poetry’ were ‘first used in World War I and perhaps peculiar to it’; he then spent almost his entire essay explaining how war poems came to be ‘published by the thousand’ during World War I and why, when he was publishing his own *Collected Poems* in 1938, he ‘could not conscientiously reprint any of my “war poems”—they were too obviously written in the war-poetry boom’.<sup>2</sup> This choice by Graves has made his war poetry less well known. The editor of a recent anthology of the ‘essential’ poetry of World War I with contextualizing commentary considers it a significant achievement ‘to include some of the war poetry of Robert Graves which he suppressed for over half a century’.<sup>3</sup>

Graves may have been truthful in 1941, but it is only a partial truth. His ‘suppression’ of his war poetry and his limited original publication of it<sup>4</sup> also reflect an ambivalence on his part about how well his war poems convey his own experiences of war and his attitudes

<sup>1</sup> Graves (1995) 79–83, originally appearing as ‘War Poets in This War’, *Listener*, 26 (23 Oct. 1941), 566–7.

<sup>2</sup> Graves (1995), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Roberts (1996), 11.

<sup>4</sup> On the publication history of his poems about war, see Graves (1988), 80–92.

towards the war in which he fought, was wounded, and even, for a time, was listed as killed, and his thinking about war as a human social phenomenon.

Graves was also a well-trained classicist, and a few of his war poems have clear classical themes. Of these, 'Escape', a *katabasis*, first privately printed in 1916, inspired by Graves's own death experience, and 'The Legion', first printed in 1917, have drawn the fullest recent critical attention.<sup>5</sup> A key quality of both poems that we shall see in other of Graves's war poems is the distance Graves intentionally puts between what other soldiers and he himself experienced during World War I and the subject matter and themes of individual poems. What Vandiver says about 'The Legion' is true about many of Graves's war poems: 'the poem does not specify any equivalencies and invites different readings.'<sup>6</sup> It is worth considering why Graves writes this way about the trauma of war.

We might also wonder why a prodigious scholar and writer who did so much work in the Classics (a dense handbook of mythology, historical novels, translations of vivid war epics: Homer's *Iliad* and Lucan's *Pharsalia*) used classical themes in his war poetry so rarely. In all of his collected writing on poetry Graves never mentions the standard Greek war poets Tyrtaeus, Callinus, and Archilochus, even though Archilochus has attitudes towards war that Graves could well have viewed with sympathy and Tyrtaeus and Callinus proffer values that Graves could have taken apart with critical ease. Graves as a critic takes up the supreme war poet Homer sparingly and tangentially, most prominently in his essay on Virgil, whom he dismisses as a timorous, inoffensive 'anti-poet' who 'bartered his talent for social security', had 'little to say of personal value', and wrote using 'tricks and evasions'.<sup>7</sup>

For the last twenty years at the University of Texas at Austin I have taught a regular seminar focused on human creative responses to experiences of war and violence from the ancient Greeks to the present. I discuss here the war poems of Robert Graves from this perspective. Let me first explain my reasons for being concerned about what Graves is doing as a war writer. He has peculiar qualities

<sup>5</sup> Vandiver (2010), 26–8, 314–21.

<sup>6</sup> Vandiver (2010), 27, and see n. 82 for the few particular references in the poem, in three lines only, to the weaponry and provisions of World War I. Without them the poem would have no modern reference points.

<sup>7</sup> Graves (1995), 321–35, esp. 322–3.

as a war poet—we have already mentioned one—that can best be understood in relation to other writers of ‘war myths’, ancient and modern.<sup>8</sup>

Of the famous triad of World War I soldier poets associated directly or indirectly with Craiglockhart War Hospital and the Freudian ideas of Dr W. H. R. Rivers, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves,<sup>9</sup> Graves strikes me as both the easiest to pigeonhole, as Paul Fussell has,<sup>10</sup> and the hardest to place in the right pigeonholes. If Graves is to be understood as a war poet, he also has to be understood in relationship to his memoir *Good-bye to All That*. Fussell considers *Good-bye to All That* a work of fiction. Fussell’s reading of Graves’s memoir brings up the thorny problem of truth in war writing, which we shall discuss below. We must also figure out the state of mind, spirit, and temperament Graves was in when he wrote his war poems, and when he produced *Good-bye to All That* in a remarkable, furious eight-week frenzy.<sup>11</sup>

I think that the rhetorical stance Graves adopts in some of his war poems relates to symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTS) that he developed throughout a childhood that was strict, unnurturing, unplayful, and lacking strong parental or other humanly vital attachments.<sup>12</sup> They were intensified by the shocks of war.

This explains in part the characteristics of his war writing. Graves takes up the same subjects that other writers about war, particularly Greek authors of the archaic and classical periods, poets and non-poets, deal with directly, seriously, and with palpable, often intense feeling. By contrast, Graves uses rhetorical strategies that put him, and us as readers, at a distance from the strong emotions war evokes. His narrative voice in his war poems strikes us readers as detached and unemotional, but it helps us take in traumatic scenes and events without being too troubled or disturbed. This may be partly because

<sup>8</sup> See for an overview of twentieth- and now twenty-first-century war literature: Palaima and Tritle (2013).

<sup>9</sup> On Graves’s intellectual relationship with Dr Rivers, which Graves insists was, unlike Sassoon’s and Owen’s, not for psychiatric treatment, see R. P. Graves (1995), 1–2, 468 n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Fussell (1975), 203–20 *et alibi*.

<sup>11</sup> Fussell (1975), 208.

<sup>12</sup> See Ehrhart (1994) regarding what we might ruthlessly call the ‘GIGO’ or ‘garbage in, garbage out’ effect on individuals who go to war. According to it, reactions to events in war by specific soldiers are dependent on their psychological histories, states, and outlooks before they experienced combat trauma.

we are not among the group of individuals whom trench warfare caused to be, as Graves later puts it, 'bound to one another by a suicidal sacrament'.<sup>13</sup> Graves also writes his war poems in a clean and spare style that the experiences of war impose on other classic war writers, like Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien, and George Orwell.<sup>14</sup> Their efforts thereby to capture what is concrete and real can make non-initiates feel left out.<sup>15</sup>

Athenian tragedians use myths in their plays to obtain an equal distancing effect. Think especially of what Euripides does in the *Trojan Women*, written and performed at the time of the massacre and enslavement of the population of the island city state of Melos.<sup>16</sup> Because the enormous human suffering in Euripides' play was represented in the Theatre of Dionysus as occurring to non-Greeks in the distant past after the fall of Troy, the Athenian veteran soldiers who made up Euripides' audience absorbed the right dosage of the trauma of the women and children they had enslaved on the island of Melos, whose adult male husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons they had killed—and killed in large numbers, probably about 500 adult males, up close and personally, with swords or spears.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, as we have mentioned, Graves largely eschews using classical themes in this way. 'Escape' is the chief exception that proves the rule. In it Graves takes up the harrowing topic of his literally coming back from the dead, and treats this morbid topic light-heartedly as a getaway from Cerberus and other legendary figures of Hades. One can imagine what he describes in the poem being rendered as an entertaining cartoon movie.

Graves's definition of his poetic audience is also very restricted. Graves as a war poet keeps his own feelings at a remove. This is very

<sup>13</sup> Graves (1995), 467.

<sup>14</sup> Reinforcing the habits of writing acquired, according to Graves (1957a), 20, from a headmaster who taught him to write 'eliminating all phrases that could be done without, and using verbs and nouns instead of adjectives wherever possible'. See Palaima (2002) and Hynes (1997), xv, on T. E. Lawrence's appraisal of 'sane, low-toned' war writing.

<sup>15</sup> Broyles (1984), 61 remarks that at some level the purpose of a war story 'is not to enlighten but to exclude; its message is not its content but putting the listener in his place. I suffered, I was there. You were not. Only those facts matter. Everything else is beyond words to tell. As was said after the worst tragedies in Vietnam: "Don't mean nothin'". Which meant, "It means everything, it means too much".'

<sup>16</sup> See Tritle (2000), 89–92; Green (1999), 103–8.

<sup>17</sup> Renfrew and Wagstaff (1982), 140–1.

different from what Sassoon and Owen are doing in their classic poems. And Graves's stance in his war poems is different from his own unremittingly and rather pig-headedly satirical take on Homer's *Iliad* as put forward in the introduction to his translation *The Anger of Achilles: Homer's Iliad* (1959).<sup>18</sup>

In my seminars we look at the following topics, which will help explain my interests in and perspectives on Graves's war poems: (1) how human beings respond, individually and communally, to experiences of war and violence; (2) how and why they use 'myths', defined, in the ancient Greek sense, to encompass all kinds of 'communication': diaries, memoirs, poetry, short stories, novels, journalistic accounts, popular or traditional songs, government reports, narratives within psychiatric sessions, histories, oral histories, biography, autobiography, letters, films (documentary and fictional), plays, and graphic arts, and now emails, blogs, text messages, and video clips; (3) how these accounts are received and interpreted by target and non-target audiences, both societies at large and different subgroups and individuals within societies; (4) what characteristics such 'myths' have; (5) how such 'myths' relate to moral questions.

More specific areas of concern are (a) universals and particulars in 'myths' of the experience of war at different times and places; (b) how elites control the information about war that non-combatants in societies receive; (c) the nature of 'truth' in such 'myths', specifically attitudes towards 'truth' and the boundaries between fact and fiction in authors of 'myths' as diverse as Wallace Terry and Joan Morrison (oral history), Tim O'Brien and Tobias Wolff (short stories and novels), Charles Patterson, Bill Ehrhart, and Rolando Hinojosa Smith (poetry), Chris Hedges, John Burnett, Gordon Dillow, and Seymour Hersh (journalism<sup>19</sup>), Jesse Odom, E. B. Sledge, Robert Graves, and Xenophon (war memoirs), Werner Herzog, Nancy Schiesari, Ricardo Ainslie, and Bernard Edelman (documentary film and its basis), Bill Broyles (scriptwriting and memoir), Larry Tritle, Paul Cartledge, James Tatum, Donald Kagan, and Graves himself (ancient historians and classicists<sup>20</sup>), and playwrights (both ancient

<sup>18</sup> Graves (1959), 13–35.

<sup>19</sup> See Katovsky and Carlson (2004).

<sup>20</sup> In processing and analysing the messages of Graves's war poems, it is important to keep in mind that he is also a mythographer and one of the most influential, if highly idiosyncratic, interpreters of Greek and related myths in the twentieth century. The intelligent criticism of Graves's theories on myth by Kevin Herbert, a classicist

and modern), and, of course, in the audiences for these diverse creators of 'myths'; (d) the ways 'myths' affect how and why different societies engage in war and violence, that is, how 'myths' are constructed to encourage active participation in and support of socially sanctioned uses of violence or to oppose specific wars and what happens to soldiers fighting them; (e) the 'disillusionment', as Freud termed it in his 1915 essay, that occurs in times of war in modern European societies because of the irreconcilable differences in the social values promoted by 'myths' during times of peace and times of war; (f) taboos about what can and cannot be conveyed about war and death (especially from World War I onward) during times of war;<sup>21</sup> (g) target audiences for 'myths', why those targets are chosen by the authors of 'myths', and what happens when non-target individuals and groups receive the 'myths'; (h) difficulties in interpreting 'myths' of war across cultures. Of these (c), (e), (f), and (g) most concern us here with Graves.

I have also consulted over time, and even team-taught with, mental-health practitioners like Jonathan Shay, Aphrodite Matsakis, Ricardo Ainslie, Stephen Sonnenberg, and Lesley Martin, and have had war veterans, journalists, oral historians, authors, film-makers, writers, and musicians into my seminars. I taught at the United States Military Academy at West Point in October 2003 on unit cohesion and the ideology and morality of war in ancient Greece. The Academy professor who invited me there, Col. Ted Westhusing, died outside of Baghdad on 5 June 2005, a likely suicide victim of our congressionally authorized presidential use of pre-emptive force and of the contractor corruption that is prevalent within it. He was a former student, in intensive Greek, a scholarly collaborator and good friend.<sup>22</sup> So I find it impossible to write about even the war poetry of Robert Graves in a purely academic way. Another way of putting it is that I marvel at Graves's own self-willed detachment.

War is a constant in human history.<sup>23</sup> Warfare is a unique form of social activity that reveals the best and worst of what it is to be

and World War II Pacific theatre veteran, is still worth reading: Herbert (1956), 191–2.

<sup>21</sup> Palaima (2007), 18–28.

<sup>22</sup> Palaima (2007), 9 and nn. 2–3. See also 'Ted's Ghost: The Death of Ted Westhusing Leaves a Widening Circle of Sorrow', *Austin Chronicle*, 27 Apr. 2007: <<http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2007-04-27/469144/>> (last accessed 08/06/12).

<sup>23</sup> Palaima (2005).

human. Reduced to its essence, as Paul Fussell notes,<sup>24</sup> war is ironic. And Graves is a poster child for what Fussell sees as irony. But Graves uses irony in a different way than Fussell does.

Owen and Sassoon reach the point of extreme anger in trying to get readers on the home front to feel what they and their fellow-soldiers have gone through, mostly for senseless reasons. Sassoon is angry with civilians on the home front who do not share in, or even acknowledge, the suffering of soldiers in the field, and who furthermore support, passively or actively, the governmental decisions that cause deaths and wounding, physical and psychological, on a scale that had never been seen before. The list of types that deserve to be satirized and psychologically wounded that Sassoon portrays in his poems is long:<sup>25</sup> smug and comfortable gentlemen, vicars and bishops, veterans of earlier wars, mothers, sisters, wives, young women, Members of Parliament, jingoistic newspaper men, cheering crowds, egotistical generals, even tombstone makers and monument builders.

Theirs is one approach to writing war poems. Sassoon and Owen use irony in order to inflict wounds. They present graphic portraits that are intended to cause trauma. They want to make readers suffer, not necessarily to feel what the soldiers themselves have suffered, not *sympathetic* suffering, not the 'pity and fear' of tragedy, just suffering itself. Graves generally veers away from such irony and such descriptions of violence, and not just because of his neurasthenia or PTSD.<sup>26</sup> I think he grasps the danger in casting pearls of trauma before swine. For the same reason, Graves was horrified at what Sassoon was doing with his *non serviam*, and took steps to rescue him from what he, Graves, saw as a kind of pointless social or political suicide. The staff officers at headquarters and the people back home, as Fussell and many war writers and veterans have documented, were not ever going to 'get it'.

Despite clear and available facts, modern societies can and will deny the obvious. The statistics for World War I are morally inexplicable: over 65 million soldiers mobilized, over 8½ million killed

<sup>24</sup> Fussell (1975), 7 and 18.

<sup>25</sup> 'They', 'The Choral Union', 'The Tombstone-Maker', 'The General', 'Fight to a Finish', 'Editorial Impressions', 'Suicide in the Trenches', 'Glory of Women', 'Their Frailty', and 'On Passing the New Menin Gate', in Sassoon (1947), 23, 24–5, 27, 75, 77–9, 188.

<sup>26</sup> On Graves's self-admitted neurasthenic state, see Graves (1995), 1–4.

and died, over 21 million wounded. They make the words written on the British campaign medals given to every soldier who served seem like the words of a monster or a madman: 'For Civilization.'<sup>27</sup>

Graves believed firmly in the futility of trying to get the realities of war experience across to those who have not been through them.<sup>28</sup> So even in his occasional anti-war preaching Graves lacks conviction. A poem like 'The Next War' lacks intensity, zeal, and belief, even in its punch-lines.<sup>29</sup> We might compare Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' with Graves's poem.

Owen's famous plea not to inspire impressionable and emotional young men to desire the false glory of war is addressed directly to his adult readers. He gives us what he calls in a letter to his mother from April 1918 an almost 'photographic representation' of what would otherwise be unimaginable conditions and sufferings.<sup>30</sup> Owen's vivid images immerse us in the horror of 'men cursing through sludge'. Most of these men, before going to war, were in their physical prime. They now are 'knock-kneed', 'coughing like hags', 'limping', 'blood-shod'. All of them Owen asserts with anaphora are 'blind' and 'lame'. One unfortunate soldier is 'guttering', 'choking', and 'drowning' in what looks to other soldiers through the eye-covers of their masks like a 'green sea' of gas.

In contrast, Graves's poem is addressed to the young children themselves (as if they can understand what he is getting at). He offers a general description of 'Kaisers and Czars' tritely strutting the stage and 'young friskies' jumping and fighting with 'bows and arrows and wooden spears' while 'playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers':

You young friskies who today  
Jump and fight in Father's hay  
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,  
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers,  
Happy though these hours you spend,  
Have they warned you how games end?

<sup>27</sup> On European attitudes about the First World War, before and after it was fought, see generally Palaima (2005), 129, and Palaima and Tritle (2013), 728–31.

<sup>28</sup> Despite his belief, expounded in Graves (1995) 6, in poetry as an act of faith and that poems could 'move mountains' short distances.

<sup>29</sup> Graves (1988), 43–4.

<sup>30</sup> The letter (no. 609) contains a first draft of 'A Terre (being the philosophy of many soldiers)'. Owen (1967), 545. The original is in the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin.

Boys, from the first time you prod  
And thrust with spears of curtain-rod,  
From the first time you tear and slash  
Your long-bows from the garden ash,  
Or fit your shaft with a blue jay feather,  
Binding the split tops together,  
From that same hour by fate you're bound  
As champions of this stony ground,  
Loyal and true in everything,  
To serve your Army and your King,  
Prepared to starve and sweat and die  
Under some fierce foreign sky,  
If only to keep safe those joys  
That belong to British boys,  
To keep young Prussians from the soft  
Scented hay of father's loft,  
And stop young Slavs from cutting bows  
And bendy spears from Welsh hedgerows.

Another War soon gets begun,  
A dirtier, a more glorious one;  
Then, boys, you'll have to play, all in;  
It's the cruellest team will win.  
So hold your nose against the stink  
And never stop too long to think.  
Wars don't change except in name;  
The next one must go just the same,  
And new foul tricks unguessed before  
Will win and justify this War.  
Kaisers and Czars will strut the stage  
Once more with pomp and greed and rage;  
Courtly ministers will stop  
At home and fight to the last drop;  
By the million men will die  
In some new horrible agony;  
And children here will thrust and poke,  
Shoot and die, and laugh at the joke,  
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,  
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers.

'The Next War' shows flashes of Graves's below-the-surface Sassoonian anger at government ministers who 'fight to the last drop' of the

blood of other men while themselves living comfortably at home.<sup>31</sup> His adult anger also is felt when he tells the boys that notions of fair play will not prevail when 'you'll have to play, all in; | It's the cruellest team will win'. But Graves does not put us in his scenes. Nor does he give us a narrator who can personalize observations. And his most graphic words are tame when compared to Owen's horrific vocabulary: 'starve', 'sweat', 'die' (three times), 'stink'. Graves as writer of 'The Next War' lacks the kind of literal enthusiasm that Graves as a well-trained scholar of Greek and Latin deeply believed was necessary to create good poetry. Still, we should acknowledge that Graves's poem is true to his conceit. His narrator speaks kindly words to young children. His language, observations, images, lessons, and warnings all merit a G-rating. In this way, too, the poem is non-classical.<sup>32</sup>

I think Graves saw that depictions of trauma and ironic twists, if embedded in poetic content that conveyed too much genuine human feeling and if described in vivid and beautiful language, could be used as a kind of entertainment by the audience and that sincere emotions would be misused in a philistine way, that is, desecrated. And I think he knew and felt this deeply well before he set foot in France.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Graves was certainly aware of the extravagant parody of Athenian ambassadors to the Persian court and to the court of Sitalces, king of the Odrysians in Thrace, in Aristophanes's war comedy *Acharnians*, produced six years into the Peloponnesian War. The ambassadors recount their sybaritic 'sufferings'. They have been forced to live for long periods in the midst of foreign luxuries and survive on ample *per diem* salaries, while Athenian soldiers and common civilians at war back home suffer and die.

<sup>32</sup> According to the Motion Picture Association of America, a G-rated movie 'contains nothing in theme, language, nudity, sex, violence or other matters that, in the view of the Rating Board, would offend parents whose younger children view the motion picture'.

<sup>33</sup> See King (2009), 10–28 for details of Graves's childhood. If we read Graves's own description attentively and with human sympathy, we can see that his childhood was not happy or nurturing. Graves felt anger and dislike toward, and distance from, his father Alfred, a schools inspector. Alfred, father of ten children by two wives, was absorbed in his own educational reform work (having to do in part with sports that his son Robert detested) and had no time or inclination to take Graves's youthful writing seriously. Afflicted with an almost James-O'Neill-like obsession with money, Alfred also placed Robert in a succession of preparatory schools that were below his level of intellectual attainment. These schools were not suited to Robert's temperament and spirit. Robert's lack of pocket money, ready-made clothes, and disinclination to participate in the sports that his father's reforms promoted marked him out. At home Robert lived in an atmosphere of extreme discipline, austerity, strict rules of moral conduct—King (pp. 17–19) says Graves lived in 'moral terror', coldness of

Tim O'Brien identifies this trap in 'How to Tell a True War Story'. An old lady, typical of many sentimental but essentially unsympathetic civilians, hears a sincere soldier's story. She feels a maudlin pity for the baby water buffalo that one young soldier Rat Kiley shoots to death part by part after the death of a fellow-soldier. She is incapable of understanding that he does this in a paroxysm of grief for the soldier friend he has lost:

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she likes. The poor baby water buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.

I won't say it but I'll think it.

I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *you dumb cooze*.

Because she wasn't listening.

It *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story.<sup>34</sup>

In the same way, staff officers may feel a self-serving sadness over the men they send out to ghastly forms of death. It is one of the reasons behind Harrison Starr's advice to Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Might as well write an anti-glacier book as an anti-war book.<sup>35</sup>

Graves permits himself the use of irony also in his poem 'The Persian Version', published in *Poems 1938-1945*. It is another exception that proves the rule, as he sees it.<sup>36</sup> The poem operates within the sphere of central, even civilian command. It never gets to the actual suffering of the many Persian soldiers who lost their lives on the

disposition, rigid class separation, lack of companionship, Puritanism, prudery, and emotional repression. Graves (1957a), 12-43, describes his parents, home life, the several schools before Charterhouse that his father placed him in, and his years at Charterhouse where 'from my first moment . . . I suffered an oppression of spirit that I hesitate to recall in its full intensity'. Graves says that as the eighth of ten children he related to his mother and father as if they were grandparents—they were 40 and 49 years of age when he was born: 'We had a nurse, and one another, and found that companionship sufficient.' Moreover, at the age of 4½ Graves was sent off to a public fever hospital, where he first began to grasp the implications of class distinctions.

<sup>34</sup> O'Brien (1990), 84-5.      <sup>35</sup> Vonnegut (1969), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Graves (1946), 46. It is the exception, too, in not being included in the posthumous 1988 collection of Graves's poems about war.

plains of Marathon. In fact, Graves classifies the poem not as a poem, but among what he calls his satires and grotesques. And I think we must take literally the short clarification that he writes in the foreword to *Poems 1938–1945*: ‘I write poems for poets and satires and grotesques for wits. For people in general I write prose, and I am content that they should be unaware that I do anything else. To write poems for other than poets is wasteful.’<sup>37</sup> Graves has a nearly infinite capacity to be coy, but this statement, at least as it applies to his war writing, strikes me as meant to be taken straight. And it is telling.

Truth-loving Persians do not dwell upon  
 The trivial skirmish fought near Marathon.  
 As for the Greek theatrical tradition  
 Which represents that summer’s expedition  
 Not as a mere reconnaissance in force  
 By three brigades of foot and one of horse  
 (Their left flank covered by some obsolete  
 Light craft detached from the main Persian fleet)  
 But as a grandiose, ill-starred attempt  
 To conquer Greece—they treat it with contempt;  
 And only incidentally refute  
 Major Greek claims, by stressing what repute  
 The Persian monarch and the Persian nation  
 Won by this salutary demonstration:  
 Despite a strong defence and adverse weather  
 All arms combined magnificently together.

‘The Persian Version’ appeals to intellects that are refined enough to appreciate pure irony, not irony in the service of social causes, least of all social reform. Its witticism is not even designed to bring home an intellectual point. True wits already see the lies, charade, and cruel misfortunes many suffer in life and surely suffer in war. They take delight when one of their kind points out another instance in a good literary style. But they do not feel any obligation to do anything about human behaviours that have been manifest in the western tradition, as Graves with his deep knowledge of classical texts would be well aware, ever since the god-sanctioned suffering brought on by Agamemnon’s high-command egotism and poor strategizing in *Iliad*, Books 1 and 2.

<sup>37</sup> Graves (1946), no page number.

In his introduction to *The Anger of Achilles* Graves attributes the severe defeat that the Greeks are suffering by Book 9 to Agamemnon's 'own stupidity', and he describes Agamemnon's famous test of the troops in Book 2 as 'a fiasco' caused by his overacting to the point of convincing himself of the defeatism that was intended to be part of the ploy. In Book 4 Graves sees that Homer has made Agamemnon 'superbly ridiculous', 'self-pitying', and 'defeatist'.

Paul Fussell, in his many critical studies of war, comes close to sharing Graves's attitude and perspectives. But like Sassoon and Owen, Fussell has a different set of sensibilities. They think what they write can make some difference. Graves does not. Most telling is that Graves says he writes his poems for poets, because, essentially, it is stupid to do otherwise. This implies that his poems do not have the general political, communal, or social aims we associate with the Greek lyric war poets, the Greek tragedians, and the Homeric poems. Graves writes poems for special people and special people only. Readers like me, and perhaps you, are uninvited guests at a very special party.

According to Cormac McCarthy—and an implication of Weil (1939)—knowing and understanding the reality of war gives a profound insight into the human condition.<sup>38</sup> It is when such insight is falsified or not widely shared within an individual's defining larger and smaller culture groups that psychological wounding, disillusionment, and feelings of alienation and betrayal arise that can explain many of the distinctive symptoms of PTSD.<sup>39</sup>

O'Brien also gives us some advice on how to tell whether a war story is true or not:<sup>40</sup>

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and

<sup>38</sup> See the speech of Judge Holden in McCarthy (1985), 331. See also Knox (1990), 29.

<sup>39</sup> Bradley (2000); O'Brien (1990), 155–73: 'Speaking of Courage', and 73–91: 'How to Tell a True War Story'; Sassoon (1937), *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> O'Brien (1990), 68.

uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares. He's nineteen years old—it's too much for him—so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and says cooze, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true . . .

In these quoted words O'Brien is pushing into the territory explored, mapped out, sketched, and painted by Cormac McCarthy:<sup>41</sup> 'Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen the horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance.' O'Brien's narrator is swearing allegiance to obscenity and evil in the same way that Owen in 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' runs a word-camera over the face of the soldier exposed to gas, 'a devil's sick of sin'. Graves never wants to go where they go, even in his poems.

The poem 'The Persian Version', which in its way is both a satire and a grotesque, and Graves as its author both rely on our understanding, from Herodotus's description of Thermopylae and the Persian empire in general, that there was one free person among all those human beings of all those different ethnicities and cultures over whom King Darius and later King Xerxes held sway. The poem also relies on our knowing Herodotus's description of what Xerxes saw sitting remotely on his ridge-top throne that overlooked the island of Salamis. From that human Olympus, watching Queen Artemisia in the naval combat, Xerxes sees what he wants to see. No one can make him the wiser. No one will tell the Great King that the queen of Herodotus's hometown of Halicarnassus rammed a ship in the Persian naval force and thereby sent to their deaths sailors who were Persian allies. Xerxes thinks she has acted with manly bravery for the Persian cause. Fussell himself singles out the two ironic concluding lines of 'The Persian Version' as characteristic of Graves's 'unsoftened views of the Staff and institutions like it':

Despite a strong defense and adverse weather  
All arms combined magnificently together.<sup>42</sup>

They are in fact, in my opinion, characteristic of a different kind of irony, irony that is only used when Graves can be sure that it will have

<sup>41</sup> McCarthy (1985), 331.

<sup>42</sup> Fussell (1975), 85.

the effect that he intends. Graves is acknowledging for those with wit that power-figures throughout history see the world and the consequences of their own decisions as they want to see them. The writing of a soldier poet will not change matters.

Here the effect is worked on wits who can appreciate that Darius, back in what we now call Iran (whether Persepolis or Susa), will accept the distant battle at Marathon, a small strip of beach and plain in the very north-east limits of Attica, a battle that we view as a turning-point in western history, as a minor skirmish in which the officers on the spot report that the troops acquitted themselves well. The mild sarcasm here also cuts into the flesh of western intellectuals who make more of the Battle of Marathon than it can bear.

We may compare here Graves's 1916 poem 'The Adventure',<sup>43</sup> about false reports from the field processed on the front by fighting soldiers and field officers. There, as in the companion 1916 poem 'The First Funeral',<sup>44</sup> Graves taps into nursery memories as he explores experiences that require close observation of the grotesque. In 'The Adventure', a fearsome tiger killed in a child's imagination becomes a German wire party that British machine-gunners said they wiped out. Inspection of the terrain, impressing what horrors on the soldiers' imagination Graves does not say, reveals no corpses. But if we want a corpse, Graves has already given us one.

In 'The First Funeral', a bloated corpse decaying on barbed wire in No Man's Land calls to mind a dead dog that Graves and his older sister came upon in 1899, when he was 4 years old, at the end of Sandy Road where it crosses the golf links. *She* prods it with a stick. *She* takes charge of its burial, sprinkling it with wild mint. Graves finds the mint. *They* give it a burial. Graves and his reader are on the safer terrain of memory in which he can and does take the action he cannot take in France. In France, at the front, he has no older sister to tell him what to do or to do it for him. The soldier is hung up on the German wire and couldn't be buried, Graves writes. He never tells us whether the soldier is British or German. The young brother and sister of Graves's memory declaim a short, matter-of-fact funeral prayer: 'Poor dog, Amen!' It is the kind of short, no-nonsense prayer that soldiers standing exposed to danger in No Man's Land could take time to utter.

<sup>43</sup> Graves (1988), 19.

<sup>44</sup> Graves (1988), 18.

Randall Jarrell does take Graves at his word. For Jarrell, Graves is 'first and last a poet: in between he is a Graves'.<sup>45</sup> But even as a poet, Graves is *sui generis* Graves.

Soldiers will self-censor and keep to themselves what they know others cannot grasp without distortion or trivialization. Their self-imposed silence has a cost. Graves, I think, does this too. There are some examples: the suicide in the trenches that he reports matter-of-factly in *Good-Bye to All That*<sup>46</sup> and his vision of a dead enemy soldier in 'A Dead Boche'<sup>47</sup> are different strategies of indirection than he uses in 'The First Funeral'. The genuine indifference and incomprehension of non-combatants can be emotionally traumatizing. This leads some soldiers to keep inside those things they consider most personally meaningful, so that others will not be able to commit sacrilege upon their sacred knowledge.

Michael Herr and Bill Broyles both illustrate this added rule of war stories, namely that war stories can be told, not to communicate but to exclude. O'Brien's 'How to Tell a True War Story' contains elements of this. Sometimes soldiers themselves cannot interpret clearly the mysteries of events. Therefore, two of the most meaningful commentaries on anything that has happened or been experienced in war are three syllables and four syllables: 'there it is' and 'don't mean nuthin'. Compare Kurt Vonnegut's often repeated 'And so it goes' in *Slaughterhouse Five*.

This is the tone Graves strikes in 1915 in 'A Dead Boche'.

To you who'd read my songs of War  
 And only hear of blood and fame,  
 I'll say (you've heard it said before)  
 'War's Hell!' and if you doubt the same,  
 To-day I found in Mametz Wood  
 A certain cure for lust of blood:  
 Where, propped against a shattered trunk,  
 In a great mess of things unclean,  
 Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk  
 With clothes and face a sodden green,  
 Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,  
 Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

13 July 1915

<sup>45</sup> Jarrell (1969), 78.

<sup>46</sup> Graves (1957a), 103.

<sup>47</sup> Graves (1988), 30.

Here Graves the poet seems ready to preach that war is truly hell, but his heart is not in it. Graves cannot be Owen or Sassoon, O'Brien or McCarthy, or Homer as we see Homer. He checks up. He leaves off. He never drives any moral home. He leaves the German corpse 'Dribbling black blood from nose and beard'. He forces us to walk away from the scene of this single accident, just as he had to. As happens when we rubberneck as we drive by an auto accident, we never learn who this dead German is. Graves does not speculate like O'Brien in 'The Man I Killed',<sup>48</sup> or finally investigate like Paul Bäumer in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>49</sup> The German corpse remains 'A Dead Boche'. He is not Graves's dead German. He is not ours. And Graves doesn't even fantasize or tap into nursery memories of performing shorthand rites. He cannot bring himself to write something like: 'Poor Boche, Amen!' because he never uttered the words 'Poor dog, Amen!' His sister did. Four syllables that might be set alongside 'there it is' and 'don't mean nuthin'', and 'and so it goes' are not even spoken in prayer here. Graves does not give us the moral horror of a gruesome combat death in Homer or emphasize the ghastly state of the decomposing corpse. He does not make his readers feel the revulsion caused by a human countenance transformed into 'a devil's sick of sin' or by obscenity that is like 'vile, incurable sore on innocent tongues'. If Graves did not tell us the German soldier was dead, we could, from how Graves describes him, think the soldier is sleeping off the effects of a nighttime pub-crawl.

'There it is' and 'don't mean nuthin'' mean *haec lacrimae rerum*, but both also have the thousand-yard pitying stare of the grunt who tells Herr this story:<sup>50</sup>

'Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.' I waited for the rest of the story, but it seemed not to be that kind of story; when I asked him what had happened he just looked like he felt sorry for me, fucked if he'd waste time telling stories to anyone dumb as I was.

This story explains why soldiers engaged in the actual fighting can feel stronger ties with enemy soldiers than with their rear command or their populations back home. Tim O'Brien, in 'The Man I Killed', imagines an entire personal life history for an 'almost dainty young

<sup>48</sup> O'Brien (1990), 124–30.

<sup>49</sup> Remarque (1929), 216–29.

<sup>50</sup> Broyles (1984), 61.

man of about twenty', a Vietcong soldier he was forced to shoot along a trail, where the enemy's head lay 'not quite facing . . . small blue flowers shaped like bells'.

Michael Herr gives us a story of group feeling for an unseen enemy. His nickname was Luke the Gook,<sup>51</sup> a North Vietnamese Army sniper ensconced in a cave in a cliff-face, harassing a unit of soldiers like a deadly mosquito with random, untimed single shots—obviously to conserve his scarce ammunition. The American army unit radios for an air-strike of napalm that nearly obliterates the cliff itself and 'galvanize[s] clean of every living thing' the ground around Luke the Gook's 'spider hole'. When, about twenty minutes later, another single shot is fired upon them, the unit erupts in wild cheers, celebrating that the single enemy who is trying his best to kill them has survived ungodly American firepower. In contrast, we can see that Graves's 'A Dead Boche' and 'The First Funeral' are Graves poems, singular within the genre of soldiers, of whatever literary talent, expressing their thoughts on a single enemy dead.

It is important for us as humanists and human beings to think about how our soldiers have responded for 3,500 years now to experiences of war, and how we have tried to deal with the ironies of war through our individual and collective voices. In this I am following a good old classical tradition.

I mean this in two senses. In the first sense, one can trace the tradition of 'myths' of war from the earliest masterpiece about war in western literature, Homer's *Iliad*. Here again, Graves has his own reading of the *Iliad*. His version of it, *The Anger of Achilles*, is to me unsettling. It is what gets Fussell to characterize Graves as a *farceur* who has never met a lie he didn't like and wouldn't tell.<sup>52</sup>

But this may simply prove that I am really an old lady, or I haven't fully absorbed O'Brien's definition of a 'true war story'. A true war story has no point. Truth does not exist in factual reality. Truth does not even lie in what seems to be a verbatim description of a dead corpse. Truth lies in what is unforgettable, Greek *a-lēthēs*. And what is unforgettable about a dead soldier on a wire may be that you

<sup>51</sup> Herr (1977), 125–6.

<sup>52</sup> Fussell (1975), 203–6, argues soundly from Graves's own commentary on his writing of *Good-bye to All That* that Graves is a 'tongue-in-cheek neurasthenic farceur whose material is "facts"' and who 'eschewed tragedy and melodrama in favor of farce and comedy'.

wanted to do what your sister helped you to do for a dead dog sixteen years in the past. And perhaps Graves's devastating takes on all the heroes in the *Iliad* and his championing of Thersites get across what war means: the *Iliad* as *Catch-22*.

Why not? Other Greek city states must have had what Athens had: an Aristophanes to make them laugh at horror. And Joseph Heller himself has said that he was obsessed with the *Iliad* when young, and that Achilles was his constant model for his central character, Yossarian.<sup>53</sup>

Recall that Aeschylus, the grandest Greek tragedian and himself a veteran of the Battle of Marathon—a fact he declared proudly in the funerary epigram he wrote for his own tombstone, making no mention of his achievements as a playwright—claimed that all of his tragedies were 'mere scraps from the banquet of Homer'. He was right. We can also go and touch each and every individual name on the wall that is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the plaza in Washington, DC. They will all tell us a story. They will all tell us certain universal truths.

This brings me to a second meaning of classical tradition, the now-extinct classical tradition of education. One of the great figures in the study of classical Greek epigraphy, A. G. Woodhead, writes about the classical education in Latin that was the basis of most educational systems for schoolboys through to the Second World War:<sup>54</sup>

When the beginner in Latin has surmounted the first hurdles of basic grammar and made-up sentences, he moves on to tackle his first prose author. And this is usually the absorbing account, by no less a character than Julius Caesar himself, of how he and his Roman legions slaughtered large numbers of Gauls or, alternatively, how he and his legions slaughtered large numbers of fellow Romans. With this as his springboard, the student then proceeds to tackle Livy, where he reads how the Romans killed off large numbers of Carthaginians or vice versa—if not how they killed off more Gauls, or Samnites, or Aequi, or Volsci. I myself began Latin at the age of eight.

The well-spring of all western literature talks about war with brutal honesty. Schoolboys in western Europe and the United States until the 1960s were immersed pedagogically in the carnage, bloodshed, and treachery of ancient warfare. They learned about war as the Greeks themselves did in Homer and in Athenian tragedy, in a safe,

<sup>53</sup> Reilly (1998), 518–19.

<sup>54</sup> Woodhead (1990), 1.

historically far off, never-never land. But they still learned hard and real lessons. After the Second World War, however, American schoolboys learned John Wayne movie fairy-tales and history made nice. During the Vietnam War, the only anti-war film that Hollywood produced was *M.A.S.H.* (1970), set during the Korean War.

There are consequences when we ignore war as we do now, when we transform violence into a game and pretend that, by dropping 'smart bombs' or using drone missiles, we can accomplish the necessary evil of war with no harm done to us who are the good guys. The fifth-century Athenians, in Pericles's vision, according to Thucydides, willed themselves to believe that they were the good guys. They pretended that in their imperial expansion they had created *kharris*, or favourable and obligatory good-will, wherever they had brought other Greek city states into effective subjugation. Their self-deception is patent. Graves saw it repeated in World War I. I think he knew he could do nothing about it except write for those who also grasped it.

In my view, Graves's reading of the *Iliad* is a modern reading that does not accept what one sort of ancient reading might have been. To me there is a simple answer to the question of why Homer is so graphically accurate about combat deaths and about the whole experience of war. He had to be. His audience knew what war was. They lived war. John Wayne would not do. John Wayne, Shane, Humphrey Bogart, Plato, and the extracted glories of Homer eventually didn't do for Tim O'Brien either.

In coming to terms, over a twenty-five-year period, with the meaning of war, O'Brien gradually discards the high-flown philosophical discussions of courage and honour that run through his first, immediately post-Vietnam novel, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*.<sup>55</sup> He gets rid of all traditionally heroic figures. In *The Things They Carried* he concentrates on the men in what he claims is his fictional platoon. He concentrates on the shit that he says is essential to the telling of a true war story, and on 'small blue flowers shaped like bells.' Paul Bäumer, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, notices delicate butterflies while he is with his fellow-soldiers in a rare peaceful moment behind the lines, sitting out in the open taking an unhurried shit. This, for them, is the height of civilized luxury. He also notices a butterfly flitting among the skulls, bones, and decaying corpses in the region of all things dead

<sup>55</sup> See Palaima (2000), 8–10, 20–2.

that is ironically known as No Man's Land, but is really everyman's worst nightmare.

The Homeric poems served as acculturating instruments, in the same way that Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and O'Brien's *Things They Carried* are now used in schools. They have become something Graves did not want his works to become. Graves knew that the truths of such accounts would be stripped of their emotional force, and ultimately they could educate young men and now women to serve modern Agamemnons.

The *Iliad* gives an honest picture of almost all aspects of warfare. The catalogue includes betrayal of what is right; high command disregard for the common troops; REMF (or Rear Echelon Mother Fucker) screw-ups; the tragedy of war for the civilian population of a city under siege; combat rage; soldierly sympathies for the enemy; war fought for ignoble purposes; betrayal by the gods and piety serving no purpose; the deep pleasure men derive from the violence and hardships of war; cowardice and courage; death and destruction; blind luck and bad luck; and bad decision-making.

That Graves can go through the contents of the *Iliad* as I just have and put a satirical spin on every item is the equivalent of what Tim O'Brien and other war writers call 'heating up the story'. Graves is doing what a Thersites instinctively has to do, but, unlike Thersites, Graves aims at producing bitter and intellectualized laughter. Graves's translation of the *Iliad* is a hybrid, part prose, like *Good-Bye to All That*, written for 'the rest' of us, and part poetry, written for 'wits' who could savour the joke.

War stories and 'true' war stories reveal truths about our very natures as individuals and about the formative and driving principles of our culture. We ignore these truths only at our peril. Graves, I believe, knew that these crucial truths were being ignored, and decided—who can argue that he did so wrongly?—that these truths would always be ignored, or at least have no significant effect.

The ancient Greeks were not in danger of losing sight of the brutal realities of life or divorcing themselves from those realities. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Hesiod's account of divine conflict in the *Theogony* and the daily grind in the *Works and Days*, and later in fifth-century Athens, the many tragic and comic plays on military themes<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Tritle (2000), 103–18.

(Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, *Persians*, *Seven Against Thebes*; Sophocles's *Antigone*, *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*; Euripides's *Trojan Women*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Hecuba*; Aristophanes's *Peace*, *Birds*, *Acharnians*, *Lysistrata*) made it impossible for any young Athenian to be deluded into imagining the world was a nice place, that war was what John Wayne represented it to be,<sup>57</sup> that war could be made 'pleasant and honourable',<sup>58</sup> that human beings had advanced to such a stage that war among high civilized cultures was unthinkable, or that authority figures would act in the best interests of the community at large or of the soldiers in their charge. Nor did they believe in the Christian notion of love for their fellow-human beings that produces the internal psychological disturbance of the narrator in O'Brien's 'The Man I Killed', of Remarque's hero Paul Bäumer as he watches close up a French soldier die slowly in a shell-hole with him, or of the American GI whose thoughts are recorded in Studs Terkel's oral history:<sup>59</sup>

It was sunshine and quiet. We were passing the Germans we killed. Looking at the individual German dead, each took on a personality. These were no longer an abstraction. They were no longer the Germans of the brutish faces and the helmets we saw in the newsreels. They were exactly our age. These boys were like us.

Graves uses rhetorical distancing everywhere in his war poems. It is a classical technique in so far as it removes us from having intense human emotional responses to what Graves is describing. It is non-classical in that we readers are placed so deeply *in illo tempore* that we feel no true horror. Graves never puts us on the field of battle. We never confront a dead body with him. He presents us with what his first sight of a corpse called forth: the childhood memories of the dead dog his sister and he came across on a walk and the make-believe funeral rites they enacted. Even children know you bury all dead people, Graves says. It is time-honoured custom, a fact we have known since the last line of the *Iliad*, as rendered by Graves: 'So ended the funeral rites of Hector the Horse-Tamer.' But Graves makes us feel little *pathos* for the dead of war, buried or unburied, or for the soldiers and veterans who lived on.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Bourke (1999), 15–17; O'Brien (1973); Kovic (1976).

<sup>58</sup> Wells (1928), 139. <sup>59</sup> Terkel (1997), 5.

<sup>60</sup> A preliminary version of this chapter focusing on Robert Graves' war poetry *per se* appeared in William Roger Louis (ed.), *Irrepressible Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain* (I. B. Tauris: London, 2013), 137–50.