

CLASSICAL PRESENCES

General Editors

LORNA HARDWICK JAMES I. PORTER

CLASSICAL PRESENCES

Attempts to receive the texts, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome inevitably run the risk of appropriating the past in order to authenticate the present. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over the centuries allows us to trace the avowal and disavowal of values and identities, old and new. *Classical Presences* brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.

Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition

Edited by

A. G. G. GIBSON

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The citations in this collection from Robert Graves's literary work are by kind permission of Carcanet Press; although the references have been cited from numerous older editions, they can be found in the following volumes, *Collected Writings on Poetry*; *Complete Poems vols. 1-3*; *Count Belisarius and Lawrence and the Arabs*; *Translating Rome*; *The Golden Fleece and Seven Days in New Crete*; *Goodbye to All That and Other Great War Writings*; *Greek Myths*; *Homer's Daughter and The Anger of Achilles*; *I, Claudius and Claudius the God*; *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*; and *The White Goddess*. The electronic and online copyright consent is by kind permission of A.P. Watt Literary Agency.

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List of Contributors

Andrew Bennett: Professor of English, Department of English, University of Bristol

John Burnside: Professor of English, School of English, University of St Andrews

Philip Burton: Reader in Latin and Early Christian Studies, Department of Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham

Jon Coulston: Lecturer in Ancient History, School of Classics, University of St Andrews

A. G. G. Gibson: Honorary Research Fellow, School of Classics, University of St Andrews

Isobel Hurst: Lecturer in English, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Goldsmiths, University of London

Sibylle Ihm: formerly außerplanmäßiger Professor, Seminar für Klassische Philologie, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Duncan Kennedy: Emeritus Professor of Latin Literature and the Theory of Criticism, Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Bristol

Mick Morris: Tutor, Faculty of Arts, Open University

Sheila Murnaghan: Professor of Classical Studies; Alfred Reginald Allen Memorial Professor of Greek, Department of Classical Studies, University of Pennsylvania

Ellen O'Gorman: Senior Lecturer in Classics and Ancient History, Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Bristol

Tom Palaima: Robert M. Armstrong Centennial Professor, Department of Classics, University of Texas at Austin

Jonathan Perry: Associate Professor of History, College of Arts and Sciences, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee

Sonia Sabnis: Associate Professor of Classics and Humanities,
Department of Classics, Reed College, Oregon

Shaun Tougher: Reader in Ancient History, Cardiff School of History,
Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University

Amanda Wrigley: Research Fellow, Faculty of Media, Arts and
Design, University of Westminster

Vanda Zajko: Senior Lecturer in Greek Literature and Language
and Senior Academic Fellow, Department of Classics and Ancient
History, University of Bristol

Introduction

A. G. G. Gibson

In 1965 Malcolm Muggeridge gave a personal and contemporary view of Robert Graves in a preview for a forthcoming interview to be broadcast on the *Intimations* television programme:

Several times our paths have vaguely crossed.

In my opinion, he is, without any question, the most distinguished practitioner of English letters now living. His output has been prodigious, but none of it is insignificant. Besides being a poet, he is a highly original if unorthodox scholar; a critic, blessedly free of pedantry, a novelist, an essayist, and, in his Claudius books, a popular writer with a following all over the world.

Graves has had the courage and the resolution to live his own way on his own terms, without reference to, or involvement in, the political and moral controversies which have submerged so many writers and poets in our time. In his Majorca retreat he has managed to be an observer rather than a participant; as though the tragic experience of participating as a very young man in the savage buffooneries of war sufficed for a whole lifetime.¹

In 2010 I was reminded of Robert Graves's continued visibility on a visit to the National Gallery of Scotland, where I happened across a number of Faber & Faber copies of *The White Goddess* in the Gallery shop. This edition was placed alongside art books on subjects as diverse as Robert Mapplethorpe, Goya, Hendrick Golzius, Vermeer, and Christen Købke. It is striking that the poet and author Robert Graves seems to remain in the popular intellectual consciousness of

¹ Muggeridge (1965).

the twenty-first century, even if this tends to be mainly through *The White Goddess* or his novels, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* (the novels having been given additional prominence through the critically acclaimed BBC television adaptation). One would hesitate to argue that, outside of his poetry, the bulk of Graves's work is 'mainstream', and that through these books in particular he entered the popular culture of the twentieth century.

An extended period spent researching the life of Claudius eventually provoked the initiative to examine further Graves's work in Classics, and this was brought to fruition in a series of workshops, 'Classics and Robert Graves: A Relationship in Literature, Translation and Adaptation', at the University of St Andrews.² The workshops were to consider the reception and adaptation of Graves's novels for film; his impact via Classics on twentieth-century poetry; his translations from Latin into English; his perception of Greek myth; and the historical novel; however, Graves's books for children are not included in this collection. Other conferences and edited papers have addressed wider issues around Graves's poetry and literature, but this was an opportunity for the relationship between Classics itself and the body of his work to be revisited and reviewed within an interdisciplinary framework. The research material available on Graves is improving. St John's College, Oxford, has an extensive and fascinating collection of papers from Majorca, and the annotated online diaries (1935–9) on the University of Victoria website are a highly useful resource. In addition there are biographies and a complete collection of poetry and novels, as well as collections of Graves's letters and essays.³ As more material becomes accessible it will allow for more cross-disciplinary studies to be attempted. This collection marks an initial step along that path.

There are a number of impressive biographies of Robert Graves in existence (see the Bibliography), so the following paragraphs will provide only a light biographical sketch. Robert von Ranke Graves was born in London in 1895, son to Alfred Perceval Graves and Amalia

² There were three research workshops, held at the University of St Andrews on 19 September, 31 October, and 21 November 2009 respectively; these were hosted through the generous support of the School of Classics, University of St Andrews.

³ The Robert Graves Trust has excellent research resources at <<http://www.robertgraves.org/trust/index.php>> and the Poetry Foundation has a short biography and extensive bibliography at <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-graves>> (accessed 21/05/2011).

von Ranke. His mother was a great-niece of Leopold von Ranke, an eminent nineteenth-century German historian whose methodology allowed general theories to be constructed from empirical research on the primary sources. Von Ranke's aim was simply 'to see things how they really are',⁴ an aspiration, it could be argued, that would be echoed later by Graves in his literary re-creations of 'historical' events.

After attending Charterhouse School, Graves enlisted in the Welch Fusiliers at the outset of World War I and served in France from 1915 to 1917. He was wounded at the Somme in 1916; during his war service he met the poet Siegfried Sassoon, and on his eventual return to England in 1917 he went up to St John's College, Oxford, where he would become a friend of T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence would become a major influence on Graves's life until the former's untimely death. Graves wrote about his friend in *Lawrence and the Arabs*, as well as collaborating with Basil Liddell Hart on publishing their respective correspondence with, in their minds, this inspirational hero figure.⁵ In 1918 Graves married the painter Nancy Nicholson, sister of sculptor Ben Nicholson, and settled into a life of bohemian domesticity, first in Oxford, in a house rented from John Masefield, then in London. Graves invited the American poet and writer Laura Riding to work with him on a book on modern poetry, and after a brief sojourn in Egypt in 1926, where Graves taught at the University of Cairo, their theatrical affair developed. It was itself interwoven with other non-conformist relationships, and after a gothic denouement Graves finally abandoned Nancy and their four children for Laura in 1929.⁶ Around this time Graves had finished his controversial war autobiography, *Good-bye to All That*, and so he felt free to leave England with Laura that October for a new home in Deyà, Majorca. It was here that he produced many of his works connected to Classics. The initial results were *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, historical novels that Graves considered to be purely literary potboilers. It gives some indication of Graves's work ethic, or perhaps points to the severity of his financial situation, that both novels were published in 1934. Graves and Riding had to leave Majorca with the onset of the Spanish Civil War, and returned to England. He continued to write, and followed the tales of Claudius with a further historical novel, *Count Belisarius*, before venturing into the realms of myth with *The Golden*

⁴ Seymour (1995), 4; see Seymour-Smith (1995), 1–11 of 1982 edn. for the family backgrounds in literature, history, and the clergy.

⁵ R. P. Graves (1990), 51–6, 229–31.

⁶ Seymour-Smith (1995), 122 ff.

Fleece, published in the United States as *Hercules My Shipmate*. A contemporary review in *Time* provides a representative opinion of the relative merits of Graves's creative methodology:

With Hercules and his shipmates, Graves becomes an ancient Greek, moving among demigods and goddesses, myths and monsters with an easy familiarity and a wealth of erudite detail; both sometimes seem too much of a good thing. Atomic-age readers, ill-attuned to the leisurely, formal talk of Myth-Age Greeks, may find themselves skipping some of the longer speeches.⁷

Graves then took up a number of academic appointments in Britain and the United States; he was Clark Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge (1954), and notably following Cecil Day Lewis and W. H. Auden as Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford (1961–5). For most of his life he continued to write and work in Deyà, Majorca, and after escaping from the turbulent relationship with Laura Riding in 1939 he eventually married Beryl Pritchard in 1950. Throughout his career Graves had a series of influences on his thinking and his work; these would include T. E. Lawrence and W. H. R. Rivers, as well as a number of muses, including Nancy, Laura, and Beryl, among others.⁸ Robert von Ranke Graves died in 1985 at the age of 90.

Reading the biographies of Robert Graves, it becomes readily apparent that he was a man with a singular outlook. Stephen Spender wrote: 'All of his life Graves has been indifferent to fashion, and the great and deserved reputation he has is based on his individuality as a poet who is both intensely idiosyncratic and unlike any other contemporary poet and at the same time classical.'⁹

Many questions caught Graves's eye, and once a topic became the focus of intense interest he would try to get beneath its skin. He is someone who willingly and actively chose to plough his own furrow, but his idiosyncratic approach (even though Graves would probably

⁷ 'Books: The Golden Fleece', *Time* 15 Oct. 1945; see <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,792476,00.html#ixzz1NCGqdn2p>> (accessed 01/04/2011).

⁸ See Seymour (1995), 387–461. For RG's concept of the poet's relationship with and entitlement to a muse, especially later in his life, see Seymour (1995) 387–8. Seymour-Smith (1995), 93–4 and passim, Graves, R. P. (1995), 335–6, 368–9, 416–17.

⁹ Spender (1973); Stephen Spender also wrote: 'Of all poets of this time, Robert Graves is the one who, without solemnity but with total dedication, has kept the idea of poetry sacred and the idea of the poet true.'

not see it as such, and would not care if anyone thought that it was) has not always been welcome. Whatever the widespread popularity of his novels and poetry, academia has held a more diffident view of the scholastic value of Graves's output, and classicists especially seem to have baulked at his interpretation of myth and novelization of history. There has been cogent criticism of *The Greek Myths, I*, *Claudius*, and *Claudius the God*,¹⁰ and it is not the aim of the present collection of essays to promote Graves's work or suggest that his writing related (however loosely) to the discipline of Classics should be rehabilitated. Rather, the essays gathered here present individual readings of Graves's unique perspective on the various fields of study he involved himself with, and are intended to energize the debate about the value of his contribution. The essays should enhance and extend our understanding of his works within their original context, and point the way forward to assessing their relevance in how we (so to speak) figure out the ancient world. How did Graves see the classical world? Can Graves's interpretation of antiquity and his translations be seen in a new light that shows their enduring value, or should they be seen as limited by the assumptions and attitudes of his own time? Has his literary success, or even his notoriety, been detrimental to the discipline of Classics? His main publications related to Classics are detailed below, but Graves also produced poetry that used tropes and themes associated with the ancient world, and these are discussed further in Hurst's essay (Chapter 10).

Robert Graves wrote poetry for most of his adult life, producing seven distinct volumes of *Collected Poems*, and other poetry collections, over the working period from 1914 to 1975.¹¹ Unfortunately the present collection does not contain a comprehensive survey or analysis of the poetry, though aspects of it are examined in the essays by Hurst (Chapter 10), Burnside (Chapter 11), and Palaima (Chapter 12), and discussed incidentally elsewhere in the book. Graves's love poetry falls into five distinct chronological periods—his first marriage; meeting with Laura Riding, 1926–9; the years with Laura, 1930–9; the years before his marriage to Beryl, 1938–45; and the period at the

¹⁰ Beard (2006) compares Graves's laboured novels to Jack Pulman's celebrated TV adaptation; cf. Lowe (2005). One can also find criticism of Graves's poetry; for example, in the *Listener* Donald David (1959), 11–13, wrote that Graves made no allowance for the reader, or hardly even acknowledged their presence and this accounted for the toneless voice of his poetry.

¹¹ Ward (2003), 96.

end of *Collected Poems 1959*.¹² Numerous poems from different periods of his work feature gods and goddesses or mythic heroes. Examples include 'Prometheus', where the persona Graves adopts opines on 'the intractability of love'; 'Lyceia', his version of the story of Lycoan, the divine wolf and goddess of the Moon; 'Leda', where, like W. B. Yeats, Graves wrote of Zeus seducing Leda, the wife of King Tyndareus of Sparta; 'The Return of the Goddess Artemis'; and his love poem 'Ulysses', first published in 1933, where the amazing adventures, cunning, and tenacity of Homer's hero 'are rearranged and reinterpreted so that his story becomes a classic statement, a paradigm indeed, of man at the mercy of sexual appetite'.¹³ D. N. G. Carter's exposition of 'Ulysses' is illuminating and shows how much is yet to be mined from Graves's poetry in relation to the reception of Classics.

To the much-tossed Ulysses, never done
With woman whether gowned as wife or whore,
Penelope and Circe seemed as one:
She like a whore made his lewd fancies run,
And wifely she a hero to him bore.

In this first verse of 'Ulysses' Carter maintains that the rhythm of the sea that carried Ulysses on his journey is reflected in the rising and falling of the last two lines (and is evocative of Andrew Lang's 'surge and thunder of the Odyssey'), while the opening phrase suggests Ulysses is flotsam on the sea of love, 'a hero who is essentially passive, the victim rather than the vanquisher in his amatory exploits'.¹⁴ The poem is contextualized in Chapter 3 by Sheila Murnaghan.

While Graves's war experiences became widely read with the publication of *Good-bye to All That*, he had already published poetry written during the war and stands with Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfrid Owen, and Edmund Blunden as a First World War poet of some distinction. His war poetry is also pertinent to the focus of the recent collection, as demonstrated by 'A Dedication of Three Hats', with its reference to Mars, Minerva, and the muse Euphrosyne.¹⁵

¹² Carter (1989), 62.

¹³ Carter (1989), 82. The poem is reproduced in full in Murnaghan's essay.

¹⁴ Carter (1989), 83. ¹⁵ Graves (1988).

'A Dedication of Three Hats'

This round hat I devote to Mars,
Tough steel with leather lined.
My skin's my own, redeemed by scars
From further still more futile wars
The God may have in mind.
Minerva takes my square of black
Well-tasselled with the same;
Her dullest nurselings never lack
With hoods of scarlet at their back
And letters to their name.
But this third hat, this foolscap sheet,
(For there's a strength in three)
Unblemished, conical and neat
I hang up here without deceit
To kind Euphrosyne.
Goddess, accept with smiles or tears
This gift of a gross fool
Who having sweated in death fears
With wounds and cramps for three long years
Limped back, and sat for school.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Sean O'Brien concluded that Graves's love poetry should be 'read alongside playful anthology pieces such as 'The Persian Version' and 'Welsh Incident'. No one else offers his precise combination of eroticism, nightmare and epigram'.¹⁶

'The Persian Version', a poem about the Battle of Marathon first published in 1945 and discussed in the essay of Tom Palaima, warrants a brief excursion here because the reaction to Graves's poem, true to form, touched a collective nerve with classicists. Despite a scarcity of written records other than the account of Herodotus, for over a century scholars have been divided into two camps engaged, as Hoyland notes, in a metaphoric push-and-shove in trying to reconstruct the battle.¹⁷ Tuplin argued from the Persian side and reckoned that Graves has here minimized its importance as part of an imperial invasion to subjugate Greece. The opposing view (see Hölkeskamp) promotes the notion that both Persia and the Greeks saw Marathon

¹⁶ O'Brien (2001).

¹⁷ Hoyland (2011), 265.

as purely a minor skirmish. In a short critique on Marathon, in his general history *Early Greece*, Oswyn Murray cites the first two lines of 'The Persian Version' and comments: 'From the Persian side there is something to be said for Robert Graves' analysis.'¹⁸ Graham Trengrove's close reading of the poem shows that the voice in the poem is neither that of the poet nor a historian giving their interpretation of events or even a commentary on the unreliability of the sources, but is that of an official spokesman putting a gloss on affairs. In a new century, seemingly built upon the shifting sands of public-relations spin and counterspin, this poem is as prescient as ever.¹⁹

Graves was a man well versed in the propaganda of war. He had seen Sassoon rail against the official government line promulgated to justify the allied strategy in France and Belgium; he had been shaped by the enormous loss of life at the Front; and his experience would lead him to question the official version, any version, and the white-wash splashed on by the victors. Considering the passage in *I, Claudius* where Claudius meets Pollio (see the discussion in Chapter 2, by Kennedy and O'Gorman), John Leonard writes, 'I have often thought in connection with this passage whether we have not been misreading Graves's famous satire "The Persian Version". Granted it is a devastating parody of official war-communications, but does it not also cast doubt on the "Greek theatrical tradition", and by implication on its historical tradition—a tradition that is the origin of all western historical-writing—as well?'²⁰

Another tradition, that of the historical novel, was well established when Graves wrote the *Claudius* novels—one only has to think of Tolstoy and Sir Walter Scott to determine the pedigree. Graves was not the first to adopt figures from the ancient world to the historical novel either; following in the wake of Lew Wallace's nineteenth-century novel *Ben-Hur*, Jakob Wassermann had written *Alexander in Babylon* (Fischer, Berlin 1905) and the basic model has been followed by a number of similar novels into the twenty-first century. Graves's historical novels were designed to make money, and so he had to ensure they were both populist and popular.²¹ The *Claudius* novels were so successful that Graves paid the mortgage off outright

¹⁸ Murray (1993), 281.

¹⁹ Trengrove (1986), 60–9.

²⁰ Leonard (2001), 259–72.

²¹ R. P. Graves (1990), 187–204; Seymour-Smith (1995), 241–50; Seymour (1997), 199–225.

on his home in Majorca; the film rights to the books were snapped up within a year by Alexander Korda; and these two books have never been out of print since they were first published. Graves had a serious interest in making money, and an as yet unanswered question is how was he so sure that a warts-and-all story of a Roman family, albeit a violent and flashy imperial soap opera, would turn into the gravy train it did? Graves outlined his approach:

Historical novels are not legitimate if they are an excuse for a thrilling story of modern passion in fancy dress. But they are legitimate if the writer starts with a sudden intimate feeling about a particular character, and believes that the story has been mistold by history. By then soaking himself in the period and reading contemporary accounts so as not to be biased, he is able to build up a story as a zoologist builds up a whole fossil animal from a couple of bones.²²

This concept can be mapped over Graves's historical novels, and the *Claudius* books in particular. The approach has its problems, however, such as the question of how the figures in a historical novel should speak: should they be made to speak in a modern, conversational tone, or should the author try for authenticity in the manner of their speech, or should there be a third way, a hybrid between the two approaches? The 'voice' of the historical novel is discussed in this volume in essays by Bennett, Kennedy and O'Gorman, and Murnaghan.

Mary Renault and Valerio Massimo Manfredi have each written trilogies about Alexander the Great that are rooted in the sources—just two examples in a burgeoning catalogue of historical fiction that draws on the ancient world of Greece and Rome. Many novelists in this genre do not appear to share Graves's notion of what constitutes historical fiction, but there are better parallels if one looks elsewhere. Hilary Mantel won the Man Booker Prize and the Walter Scott Prize for *Wolf Hall*, a historical novel that took a revisionist stance about the life of Thomas Cromwell, a character, like Claudius, whom history has not treated kindly, and placed him centre-stage in the political milieu around the throne of Henry VIII.²³ In a review for its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, James Woods identifies the qualities Mantel uses to tell her story (in *Wolf Hall*), including how the language of the novels is not that of the sixteenth century but an

²² RG quoted by Nicholson (1942), 283–6.

²³ Acocella (2009).

amalgam of styles that is a model of clarity for the twenty-first-century reader. Woods homes in on the reason for Mantel's success, something that could equally be applied to Graves's historical fiction:

In short, this novelist has the maddeningly unteachable gift of being interesting. Quite a few readers would be prepared to yawn at a novelistic scene set in 1530, featuring Thomas Cromwell, then one of Henry VIII's privy councillors, and Thomas Cranmer, the Anglican theologian who gained renown as the author of the Book of Common Prayer. Hasn't this material been worked over—in descending order of quality—by Ford Madox Ford, by Robert Bolt, and by the TV series 'The Tudors'? Yet such a scene in 'Wolf Hall' exhibits Mantel's stealthy dynamics. There is nothing dutifully 'historical' about this encounter. Instead, all is alive, silvery, alert, rapid with insight.²⁴

Controversy surrounding Graves's work has not been restricted to classicists—*Good-bye to All That* stirred up a hornets' nest of criticism because Graves's war experience was discussed with frankness and openness. Readers and critics were disapproving of his relaying of events, and his unvarnished descriptions of soldiers' behaviour under the stress of war seemed to provoke a backlash from all quarters. The manuscript had been seen by Edmund Blunden and was subsequently closely annotated by Siegfried Sassoon, and both men were deeply angry at Graves's self-centred version of the war; his use of 'poetic licence' and the presentation of certain fictionalized events as fact were additional grounds for criticism.²⁵ Sassoon in particular was incensed by the unsolicited inclusion of a poem he had sent to Graves in a letter (of 1918), and a section in the book recounting a visit to his mother in 1916 that he felt was an invasion of privacy and not for public consumption.²⁶ The criticism of Graves for producing such a 'stylized' and even 'manufactured' autobiography still resonates today.

It is worth noting that Graves was also unpopular with the critics for his own performance as a reader and broadcaster in public, discussed by Morris in this volume (Chapter 15). An exercise broadcast on BBC radio, had the actor Anthony Jacobs and Graves reading 'Counting the Beats' then 'The Terraced Valley', with mixed

²⁴ Wood (2012).

²⁵ Seymour-Smith (1995), 190–200; R. P. Graves (1990), 131–7; Seymour (1995), 175–86. See Duckworth (2004), 63–7, for a discussion of how two incidents in *Good-bye to All That* have been recycled by the novelist Pat Barker.

²⁶ R. P. Graves (1990), 132–7.

results. One review concluded that poets are not great at this, pointing to the 'weird creaking chant of W. B. Yeats', and considered Graves's 'flat and jerky' delivery to be harder to listen to than Jacobs's more polished performance—but ponders if this really showed how Graves 'imagined the lines sounded as they formed in his mind'.²⁷ A reviewer in *Gramophone* writes of Graves reading a collection of his poems:

It is always interesting to hear a poet read his own works, even if someone else might in the event read them better. But the identity of the voice and the thing said is sometimes blurred when the reader is not the poet, especially in a work so personal as this. Mr. Graves uses a rather dead-pan delivery and he is not really very clear, though one gets used to him as time wears on . . .²⁸

Elizabeth Jennings compared Auden's 'splendid rendering of thirteen of his poems for Argo (RG194) which is a triumphant refutation of those who declare that poets are not the best speakers of their own verse' to Graves's jaded delivery:

His clipped dry donnish voice not only succeeds in ironing out most of the music it also manages to obscure much of the meaning. Only the most attentive Graves addict will be able to isolate these poems from the poet's nearly disastrous handling of them, while the personality-hunter will find Mr Graves quite as elusive as he himself has here made the witty melancholy of his fine lyrics.²⁹

The *Observer* critic writes on the third recording Graves produced: 'The reading is what we have come to expect from Graves—determinedly non-rhetorical, meticulous, a trifle hesitant, bringing out what is in the poem but almost overscrupulous in not adding anything extra.'³⁰

²⁷ RGA: uncredited review in the *Mitcham & Tooting Advertiser*, *Wallington & Carshalton Advertiser*, 14 June 1956. The programme, 'A Poet's Reading Compared with an Actor's', was introduced by James Reeves.

²⁸ RGA: uncredited review in *Gramophone* (Mar. 1960) refers to Listen LPV2.

²⁹ RGA: Elizabeth Jennings in the *Guardian* 9 June 1960 refers to Listen LPV2.

³⁰ RGA: John Wain in the *Observer*, 11 Sept. 1960 refers to Argo RG191. Derek Parker in the *Weekly Post*, 3 Dec. 1960 writes of RG191 that Graves 'reads many short poems in a voice that is peculiarly and completely the voice of his poetry: a casual yet apposite voice, hammering away at our ridiculous pomposities, inching mistrust of our human claims to immutability. Never, somehow, on duty, Graves is nevertheless always a sentry at the gates—informally heading off deserters.' Also cf. Jennings (1960).

In a quite different field, Graves again caused controversy when, in advance of writing the *Claudius* novels, he produced a heavily revised and condensed version of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and its publication as *The Real David Copperfield* (1933) caused indignation among Dickens scholars in Britain.³¹ Because Dickens had originally written *David Copperfield* for serialization, Graves surmised that a revision was necessary and proceeded to take out 'all the monthly-part padding and general hysteria . . . putting what's left into some sort of intelligible order'.³² A contemporary review in *Time* magazine expounded on how, due to the critical white noise, the publishers (Harcourt, Brace & Co.) prevaricated about an American edition. They decided to withdraw it from publication a week before the due date, and opted for producing an abridged version for schools instead.³³ The biographer Richard Perceval Graves provides another perspective, arguing that it was a misconceived project because Dickens was still enormously popular with the public, which may explain the poor sales in Britain. He goes on to add that after sixty years it can be viewed as a valuable exercise, because 'Graves's version is far more accessible to a modern audience than the original'.³⁴

The legitimacy of an adaptation, a translation, or a rearrangement of historical facts or motifs by an author is a compelling issue for discussion, and the essays collected here address this among other factors; the chapters by Andrew Bennett, Duncan Kennedy and Ellen O'Gorman, Sheila Murnaghan, Shaun Tougher, and Jon Coulston consider the historical novels; Philip Burton and Sonia Sabnis examine the translations; Sibylla Ihm has analysed myth and matriarchy, and Vanda Zajko discusses *The Greek Myths*; Tom Palaima, Mick Morris, Amanda Wrigley, A. G. G. Gibson, and Jonathan Perry discuss reception in the twentieth century; Isobel Hurst considers Graves's poetry in relation to the classical world; while John Burnside's essay gives a different perspective by providing the essential insight of one working poet into the work of another.

To attempt a synthesis of the similarities and outcomes of this project would have limited value, because readers from different

³¹ O'Prey (1982), 219. Seymour-Smith (1995), 223–4.

³² RG in R. P. Graves (1990), 161.

³³ See Book Review 'Dickens Brushed Up', *Time*, 26 Mar. 1934; the editor of the 1934 US edition was Merrill P. Paine, described by Seymour Smith (1995), 224, as 'a Dickensian pedagogue'. Notwithstanding, the edition was a sales success.

³⁴ R. P. Graves (1990), 161. Also see Seymour-Smith (1995), 223–5.

disciplines will (rightly) produce a diversity of conclusions. This is not to avoid nailing one's colours to any particular mast, but rather implies a desire for readers to fashion their own opinions about Graves's output and reflect on the current state of their discipline. Twenty years hence Classics will have been transformed again by contemporary culture and/or further academic research—whichever outcome transpires, the body of work represented here can be repositioned accordingly within that world.

However there is an unbridgeable gulf here between Graves's experience in the First World War and those of the reader a hundred years later. The war seems to have shaken the foundations of his very being, and the pointless nature of the killing seems to have led to Graves's questioning everything around him, while also affecting his relationships, sexual and otherwise. His contempt for authority is probably rooted here—why should he take any notice of what anyone thought who had not been through the same experiences as he had? Robert Graves was not an academic but a poet; one who wrote fiction to make money and followed his own star to produce stories, essays, and poems. These may be still popular, or may be unfashionable, or thought to be inaccurate, as though accuracy was the final arbiter of creativity. With a poet's input there will be no uniformity in the results. Reading John Dryden's or Cecil Day Lewis's translation of the *Aeneid*, one becomes aware that these poets draw upon the chaos and darkness of war—for Dryden, the English Civil War and the ensuing revolution that replaced James II; while Day Lewis was writing in the shadow of the Second World War (see Tom Palaima's essay for a discussion of war in poetry). For the translation of the classicist Stanley Lombardo the aftermath of the conflicts in Iraq would not be distant. Their respective translations, and there is no value judgment here, subtly expose the dissimilarities between the translators and illuminate Virgil from another aspect. The opening lines of the Cecil Day Lewis's *Aeneid* are a case in point:

I tell about the war who first from Troy's frontier,
Displaced by destiny, came to the Lavinian shores,
To Italy—a man much travailed by sea and land
By the powers above, because of the brooding anger of Juno,
Suffering much in war until he could found a city
And march his gods into Latium, whence rose the Latin race
The royal line of Alba, and the high walls of Rome.

Compare it with Lombardo's twenty-first century translation:

Arms I sing, and a man,
The first to come from the shores
Of Troy, exiled by Fate, to Italy
And the Lavinian coast, a man battered
On land and sea by the powers above
In the face of Juno's relentless wrath;
A man who also suffered greatly in war
Until he could found his city and bring his gods
Into Latium, from which arose
The Latin people, our Alban forefathers,
And the high walls of everlasting Rome.

In the light of considering other translators the essay of Philip Burton considers three questions regarding Graves's translations from Latin and Greek; firstly, Graves's championing of the plain prose style of translation; secondly, how Graves used his translation to position himself with regards to the original author and other translators; and finally, how far Graves's methodology reflected contemporary culture or just his idiosyncratic approach to the problem of translating the text in front of him. Emily Greenwood's investigation tackles the soundscape inherent in the 'translation' or, more accurately, the 'free adaptation' of the epic poem by the poet Christopher Logue.³⁵ Warren Anderson, reviewing Logue's 1962 translation of the *Patrokleia* from *Iliad* 16 writes in 1969:

What we have here is not translation, a carrying-over, but a tradition hardly less honorable which has fallen into desregard [*sic*] since the Renaissance: the practice of *aemulatio*, rivalry in the best sense. Logue is an emulator rather than a translator. Comparison with Lattimore would be entirely beside the point; we look instead (though warily) to Pound's *Cantos* and the *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. For Logue's purposes, the text of Homer must be both revered and challenged, given allegiance and also treated as a point of departure. His infidelity follows naturally from his fidelity and is justified by it. The poem he has given us, far from being a "rendering" of Patroclus' last hours, is a reexperiencing [*sic*] of their fevered, death-bound brilliance.³⁶

³⁵ For a discussion of the methodology used by translators of the *Iliad*, namely Fitzgerald, Fagles, and Lombardo, see Greenwood (2009), 503.

³⁶ Cf. Burton, Sabnis, Murnaghan, and Wrigley in this volume, and Anderson (1969), Folkart (1998), and Greenwood (2009) for an introduction to the intricacies and methodologies of translation.

Amanda Wrigley, in Chapter 16, points the reader to D. S. Carne-Ross the essayist and a translator of Pindar, who said of Graves's *The Anger of Achilles* (in its version for radio broadcast), 'the translations are, so far as possible, poets' translations rather than dons' translations'. Therein lies the dichotomy, between what the reader expects from the translator, and what the translator is trying (or is prepared) to give the audience. The characteristics of a reader, their analytical ability (or the desire to be, or not to be, analytical), and their need for education or entertainment (or both) is not a fixed generic point for an author/translator to aim at. One would expect that though the translator is a fixed point (poet or classicist), they face the impossible task of having to fit into a different set of clothes depending on who is going to pick up the book, or face the wrath of a subset of their potential readership. What should a translation be? Is the translator to be rigorous or entertaining (for which read 'populist'), or if they fall between two stools, risk ending up as neither?³⁷ Should a translator of the *Iliad* or *The Golden Ass*, for example, expect to achieve the aims of the eighteenth-century essayists Addison and Steele, who were determined to edify *and* entertain their readership? Do we, as readers, expect (or even want) to be 'enlightened'? Barbara Folkart writes that a translator (in Folkart's case, of the medieval poetry of Charles D'Orléans) immediately has to confront their own 'diachronic incompetence' and the fact of being cut off from the poem's 'cultural and pragmatic matrix';³⁸ however, there is not only an interaction between the text and reader 'but also the linguistic and cultural matrices in which both reader and text are embedded'.³⁹ The living, breathing language and life and smells of the street in medieval France or archaic Greece or the trenches of the Somme are not available to a reader in the twenty-first century. 'The cultural matrix' only remains in stones and monuments, while flesh and bone perish and ancient value-systems wither away. The result is that the translator immediately faces a deficit because they cannot experience the same milieu as that of the original audience of the poem. Folkart shows that for the modern reader the translator has to become a mediator between the past and present and to do so they should be a 'writer' and not merely a 'replicator'; and to be that 'writer' there is a need to invest as much material as necessary to make the poem the

³⁷ Folkart (1998), 11.

³⁸ Folkart (1998), 11.

³⁹ Folkart (1998), 20.

translator's own.⁴⁰ As a writer Graves could re-imagine the scenarios of ancient Greece and put his experience of the trenches into scenes of war and degradation but they could still be a plausible fabrication (see Sean Tougher and Jon Coulston's essays). Graves faced criticism for his handling of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; he gets into all sorts of trouble because he puts his stamp on a poem or narrative, and imbues it with what Zajko calls 'a literary quality'. Graves's (or another translator's) use of language may take the reader away from the source's literal or metaphorical meanings, and even distort or flatten the song of the Latin or Greek language, so much so that the original subtleties can be lost. However, a translator (or adaptor) creates an alternative version to that which has gone before, and one that brings to life the text in a way a contemporary audience can relate to. Folkart explains how Christopher Logue used a variety of methods to manipulate and create his acclaimed version of the *Iliad*:

A more recent and no less brilliant example [than Ezra Pound] is Christopher Logue's rewrite of the *Patrocleia* (Book 16 of the *Iliad*). Rather than going for the kind of Wedgwood-china imagery and diction run-of-the-mill translators fall into line with, Logue has worked in a resolutely contemporary idiom, with the sort of technique, diction and structures that would not be out of place in his own, direct poetry: there's absolutely no translating down, here . . . Logue has been even more audacious with the manipulation of cultural props, using all sorts of anachronisms and 'anatomisms' to get us inside the poem . . . And since it's impossible for the latter half of the twentieth century to subscribe to Homer's glorification of warfare, Logue has unhesitatingly reversed Homer's stance: his *Patrocleia* reads like a condemnation of war.⁴¹

Graves shows he is wedded to the idea of using the exact words, even creating them, to describe emotion and action. In an interview in 1969 he talked of love:

The act of love belongs to two people, in the way that secrets are shared. Hugs and kisses are permissible, but as soon as you start with what's called the mandalot—I invented the word, from the Greek; it comes from *mándalos* (which is the bolt you put in the socket) and means the tongue-kiss or by dictionary definition 'a lecherous and erotic kiss'—these familiarities you should reserve for those whom you really love.⁴²

⁴⁰ Folkart (1998), 21. ⁴¹ RG in *The Paris Review* (1969).

⁴² Carne Ross (1962/2010), 152.

The last word, for the moment at least, should go to Carne-Ross, as he argues that readers should not put Logue's translation next to Richmond Lattimore's. His comment in the postscript to Logue's *Patrocleia* may, to some extent, illuminate the translations of Robert Graves:

The point about good translation is not that it 'gives you the original'. It doesn't and can't and shouldn't try to. There is one place to get Homer's *Iliad* and only one place: in the fifteen thousand lines or so of the Greek text. What a translation does is to turn the original into something else (*vertit anglice*) . . .⁴³

Graves's *The Anger of Achilles*, a narrative translation of the *Iliad*, largely in prose, is an example of the above, but the opening lines in verse demonstrate both the flaws and power of his rendition. Compare this to the 1997 translation of Lombardo;⁴⁴ what should the reader take from either version of the epic tale? First Graves:

Sing, Mountain Goddess, sing through me
That anger which most ruinously
Inflamed Achilles, Peleus' son,
And which, before the tale was done,
Had glutted Hell with champions—bold,
Stern spirits by the thousandfold;
Ravens and dogs their corpses ate.
For thus did Zeus, who watched their fate,
See his resolve, first taken when
Proud Agamemnon, King of men,
An insult on Achilles cast,
Achieve accomplishment at last.⁴⁵

⁴³ See the introduction by Sheila Murnaghan to the Lombardo translation (1997), xvii–lviii.

⁴⁴ Graves continues: ' . . . I can tell you: it was Phoebus Apollo, the son of Almighty Zeus and Leto the Fair-Haired, who sent a fearful pestilence among the Greeks, by way of punishing Agamemnon their High King.' This has a poetic resonance with: 'Yet know, my master, God omnipotent | Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf | Armies of pestilence; and they shall strike | Your children yet unborn and unbegot, | That lift your vassal hands against my head | And threat the glory of my precious crown' (*Richard II*, III. iii).

⁴⁵ Just two recent examples are Tomas Alfredson's *Låt den rätte komma in* (2008) which became *Let Me In* (2010); and Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), which was remade as *The Ring* (2002); these Hollywood versions were very successful at the box office. A European success was Sergio Leone talking Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1960) and turning it into *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964).

Then Lombardo:

Rage:

Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage,
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls
of heroes into Hades' dark,
and left their bodies to rot as feasts
for dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done.

Begin with the clash between Agamemnon—
The Greek warlord—and godlike Achilles.

(*Iliad* 1.1–8)

The answer to the question must be subjective. Refashioning the original *Iliad* text, for example, 'into something else' through translation or adaptation is maybe what some scholars object to, because that 'something else' is not Homeric, or not Homeric enough—it is 'Homer-lite'. But if the latter reflects the contemporary milieu and speaks to a current readership, then is that necessarily a negative thing? Maybe a particular translation can suffer from the same critical dismay that proliferates when Hollywood takes a European or Asian low-fi hit and remodels it for the great mass of the cinema-going audience which resists films with subtitles.⁴⁶ In the music world, the same can happen when a 'cover version' of a track that has become something of a sacred cow is released; Eater's 1977 cover of *I'm Waiting for the Man*, rather than the original version by the Velvet Underground from 1967, will probably displease most Lou Reed aficionados.

CONCLUSION

In all of his endeavours it seems as though Graves tried to unwrap and expose the world he encountered, and then refashion it; this moulding was influenced by his beliefs about the Goddess or his experience of love, or war. He is insightful and infuriating in equal measure, and while we may not warm to his undoubtedly contrary

⁴⁶ Two recent examples are Tomas Alfredson's *Låt den rätte komma in* (2008) which became *Let Me In* (2010); and Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), which was remade as *The Ring* (2002); a European success was Sergio Leone taking Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1960) and turning it into *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964).

nature, as this collection of essays shows, his multifaceted work can still provoke a powerful contemporary response.

As an addendum to the ongoing discussion of Graves's literary output there is one cultural icon of the twentieth century who may (inadvertently) illuminate part of the debate. In the late 1950s Bob Dylan had access to a friend's library in New York, in which, while preferring poetry, he also read works by a range of authors from Thucydides to Balzac to Robert Graves. Dylan writes: 'I read *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, too. Invoking the poetic muse was something I didn't know about yet. Didn't know enough to start trouble with it, anyway.'⁴⁷ He would later meet Graves in London, and as Dylan says, 'I wanted to ask him some things about the book, but I couldn't remember much about it'.⁴⁸ So much for fame and influence—but it is noteworthy that Dylan read Graves when he was trying to find his own voice, listening to folk-songs, attracted by the ideas and the stories contained within them, and penetrating humanity in the milieu of fifties New York counterculture. Part of this searching led Dylan to an awakening:

[Roy] Orbison, though, transcended all the genres—folk, country, rock and roll or just about anything. His stuff mixed all the styles and some that hadn't even been invented yet. He could sound mean and nasty on one line and then sing in a falsetto voice like Frankie Valli in the next. With Roy, you didn't know if you were listening to a *marachi* or opera. He kept you on your toes. With him, it was all about fat and blood. He sounded like he was singing from an Olympian mountaintop and he meant business.⁴⁹

Dylan's analysis of Roy Orbison gives an insight into the creative process of a great musician and artist, and one that provides a functional allegory for the methodology Graves used in fashioning his work, especially that related to Classics. Orbison had a unique voice and writing style and he attracted many fans from the 1960s onwards—and importantly for Orbison, his peers recognized his talents. Although Graves and Orbison were men of different generations there are similarities in their characters and their writing—both men would mould the rules of their craft to suit themselves. Graves used an 'analeptic' creative technique, an imaginative leap, where he tried to re-create a past and put himself in the mind of his

⁴⁷ Dylan (2004), 45.

⁴⁸ Dylan (2004), 45.

⁴⁹ Dylan (2004), 33.

protagonist.⁵⁰ He would mix fact and fiction, or interchange words, and play with sounds and meaning to get the best literary combination to match his intention.⁵¹ This is not to judge the artistic success or failure of such a process, nor advocate that one should similarly equate artistic prowess across disciplines or genres. The talents of a musician and a writer can be disparate, but correspondence in the innovations and adaptations in technique mixed with ability (in whatever subjective form that may take) may go some way to explain the popularity and durability of their creative labours. Being controversial (whatever that expression may mean and however it manifests itself) can invoke a negativity amongst commentators which can in turn adversely affect the reception of a work in the wider world, although one could argue that *I, Claudius* would be an exception. But should one always equate 'controversial' with the negative? *Good-bye to All That* has provoked much argument and debate. Yet after eight decades the book still exists, it is still in print, and will probably ignite further discussion for years to come. Can this be a bad thing? If so, then on what terms is it a bad thing? Similarly, Graves's interpretation of classical myth has had a bumpy ride, but should his approach be accepted as some part of the critical and scholarly landscape or should it be consigned to the scrap-heap? There will be many who will lean towards the latter view, but I would prefer that Robert Graves's works should remain to be rediscovered and debated by future generations of readers and scholars. The closing sentence of Peter Green's critical essay on the diversity and longevity of Graves's poetry stands well with this collection of essays and could equally apply to much of Graves's other literary work:

Above all, he has inspired generations, win or lose, with the idea of what a poetic vocation should be. Those 'green fields of unrest' that lie at the heart of his last poem form an apt coda to his career. He would, I think, be proud to echo the claim of that other, equally tough, equally woman-oriented poet, the seventh-century B.C. Greek colonist Archilochus, who declared: 'I am both the War-God's servant, and have understanding of the Muses' lovely gifts.' In his rugged, smoldering, island bound old age he stands as a symbol for something above and beyond plain tangible achievement.⁵²

⁵⁰ Goldman (2003) cites Robert Graves in *King Jesus*: 'To write a historical novel by the analeptic method—the intuitive recovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time—one must train oneself to think wholly in contemporary terms' (p. 45). Also cf. Presley (1997), 301.

⁵¹ Green (1961/2), 46–50. ⁵² Green (1983), 118–19.

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'It's readable all right, but it's not history'

Robert Graves's Claudius Novels and the Impossibility of Historical Fiction

Andrew Bennett

Two contemporary academic reviews of Robert Graves's *Claudius* novels—a review of *I, Claudius* in the *Classical Journal* by the American classicist Dorothea Clinton Woodworth, and a review of *Claudius the God* in *Scrutiny* by the British literary critic D. W. Harding—may be said to encapsulate the impossibility of historical fiction. The two reviews, both published in 1935, provide what might seem to be disciplinarily stereotypical and almost diametrically opposed views of the *Claudius* project, coming at it as they do from a historical and from a literary perspective respectively. It is on this opposition of literature to history, an opposition already at work within the generic mongrel-form of the historical novel, that I want to focus in this essay in order to think about the reception of Graves's Roman novels.

In her review of the novel, Woodworth characterizes *I, Claudius* as 'an interpretation in today's language of a period nineteen centuries remote', and comments that: 'Any student of ancient or contemporary society may profitably read the author's keen juxtaposition of the one against the other.'¹ But the review is focused above all on the question of historical accuracy. For Woodworth, the novel is 'More real than ponderous, documented Roman history' but still historical, and historically veracious, since, she declares, Graves 'uses ancient

¹ Woodworth (1935), 366.

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.¹ 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'.² 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'.³

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 it⁴ also reflect an ambivalence on his part about how well his war poems convey his own experiences of war and his attitudes

¹ Graves (1995) 79–83, originally appearing as 'War Poets in This War', *Listener*, 26 (23 Oct. 1941), 566–7.

² Graves (1995), 79.

³ Roberts (1996), 11.

⁴ 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.⁵ 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.'⁶ 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 sparsely 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'.⁷

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

⁵ Vandiver (2010), 26–8, 314–21.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.⁸

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,⁹ Graves strikes me as both the easiest to pigeonhole, as Paul Fussell has,¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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

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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Fussell (1975), 203–20 *et alibi*.

¹¹ Fussell (1975), 208.

¹² 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'.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Their efforts thereby to capture what is concrete and real can make non-initiates feel left out.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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

¹³ Graves (1995), 467.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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".'

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

¹⁷ 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).¹⁸

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 (journalism¹⁹), 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 classicists²⁰), and playwrights (both ancient

¹⁸ Graves (1959), 13–35.

¹⁹ See Katovsky and Carlson (2004).

²⁰ 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;²¹ (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.²² 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.²³ 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.

²¹ Palaima (2007), 18-28.

²² 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).

²³ Palaima (2005).

human. Reduced to its essence, as Paul Fussell notes,²⁴ 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:²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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

²⁴ Fussell (1975), 7 and 18.

²⁵ '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.

²⁶ 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.'²⁷

Graves believed firmly in the futility of trying to get the realities of war experience across to those who have not been through them.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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?

²⁷ 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.

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

²⁹ Graves (1988), 43-4.

³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³²

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.³³

³¹ 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.

³² 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'.

³³ 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.³⁴

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.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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.

³⁴ O'Brien (1990), 84–5. ³⁵ Vonnegut (1969), 3.

³⁶ 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.'³⁷ 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.

³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ '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.⁴²

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

⁴¹ McCarthy (1985), 331.

⁴² 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',⁴³ 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',⁴⁴ 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.

⁴³ Graves (1988), 19.

⁴⁴ 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'.⁴⁵ 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*⁴⁶ and his vision of a dead enemy soldier in 'A Dead Boche'⁴⁷ 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

⁴⁵ Jarrell (1969), 78.

⁴⁶ Graves (1957a), 103.

⁴⁷ 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',⁴⁸ or finally investigate like Paul Bäumer in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.⁴⁹ 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:⁵⁰

'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

⁴⁸ O'Brien (1990), 124-30.

⁴⁹ Remarque (1929), 216-29.

⁵⁰ 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,⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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

⁵¹ Herr (1977), 125-6.

⁵² 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.⁵³

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:⁵⁴

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,

⁵³ Reilly (1998), 518-19.

⁵⁴ 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 *kharis*, 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*.⁵⁵ 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

⁵⁵ 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 Agamenonns.

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 themes⁵⁶

⁵⁶ 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,⁵⁷ that war could be made 'pleasant and honourable',⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

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

⁵⁸ Wells (1928), 139. ⁵⁹ Terkel (1997), 5.

⁶⁰ A preliminary version of this chapter focusing on Robert Graves's 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.

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