Heroes and Hero-worship in *Goodbye to All That*

In *The Great War and Modern Memory,* Paul Fussell defines *Goodbye to All That* as "a satire, built out of anecdotes heavily influenced by the techniques of stage comedy."[1] His account of Graves' autobiography emphasizes its structure, Graves' use of "wry anecdotes" which "take the shape of virtual playlets, or, as he is fond of calling them, especially when he is one of the players, 'caricature scenes'."[2] Fussell classifies the various types of these little farces, quoting many examples (they are eminently quotable) and thus he has no difficulty characterising the whole book as blackly humorous. For all its brilliance, though, Fussell's reading of *Goodbye to All That* seems to me a simplification of a book which, like most of Graves' prose work, is never as straightforward as his blunt style suggests. In particular, Graves' autobiography employs another structural device somewhat at odds with the series of caricature scenes. In all the phases of the book Graves presents the reader with a hero who embodies values Graves himself clearly admires. Each hero provides a comment upon Graves' own situation at that stage of his life, the progression of these heroes marks his progress, and the values they stand for, and share, offer a counterweight to the satirical humour which dominates Fussell's account of the book.

The Gravesian hero, however, is not without paradox. He is marked by his rejection of the conventions of his social surroundings and therefore he is a lonely figure, misunderstood by the vulgar and sometimes persecuted by them. His function in *Goodbye to All That* is to encourage Graves himself to rebel against convention, an action which seems to the reader less wilful and less reprehensible when the change in Graves has been anticipated by another. In many cases, indeed, Graves does not follow his hero all the way, preferring the pose of a sympathetic observer of the other's daring, and thus an element of the vicarious enters into the heroes' presentation. They enact what Graves only desires, yet by including them in his autobiography Graves expresses those desires without embracing them so that the heroic remains for him only a possibility and he retains the reader's sympathy as an ordinary mortal.

These features of the Gravesian hero are evident in the first developed example met in the book, Raymond Rodakowski, [3] Graves' friend at Charterhouse. Raymond is typical of the heroes in the book in that, first of all, he shares a strong interest in literature with Graves. He encourages Graves to write poetry and condemns as "bloody barbarians" (page 41) the schoolboys who have made fun of his poems. Raymond is therefore at odds with his immediate society, as Graves is, and they support each other in opposing the boorish sporting types who dominate Charterhouse life. Because his foreign surname has aroused the prejudice of his school-fellows, Raymond is able to sympathise with Graves' difficulties over his German middle name. In addition, like a true hero, he suggests to Graves a way to win respect, by taking up boxing, and thus he prepares the way for Graves' sporting triumph in Chapter 8. Lastly, Raymond rouses Graves to serious thought about his religion. Graves' presentation of this aspect of

his relationship with Raymond Rodakowski is subtle and revealing. Raymond, he says, "astonished me by admitting, and even boasting, that he was an atheist" (page 45). Shocked by this, Graves struggles to argue the case for orthodox Christianity, only to retire in confusion. A few lines later, Graves remarks that by the time of his last meeting with Raymond in 1917, he himself had "by then become a complete agnostic."[4] The process of rejection of orthodoxy, therefore, is enacted by the hero-figure. As it were, he braves convention on behalf of Graves, but in the end Graves follows him, though not perhaps all the way; where Raymond was "a complete and ruthless atheist" (page 45) in his teens, Graves in his twenties is no more than "a complete agnostic."

The vicarious quality of the Gravesian hero is very apparent in the second example, George Mallory the mountaineer. As with Raymond Rodakowski, the relationship between Graves and Mallory is based on shared experiences and interests. Just as Graves is at odds with most of the other boys at Charterhouse, Mallory is at odds with the staff, and even with the boys, because he refuses to act as a stereotype public-school master. Graves and Mallory were "out of their element" (page 56) at Charterhouse. They also had in common an interest in literature, although again this was unconventional, for it was Mallory, says Graves, who "told me of the existence of modern authors" (page 48), rather than of safe, established classics. But even more unconventionally, Mallory took Graves mountain climbing, and for the reader some of the romance of Mallory, especially associated with his disappearance near the summit of Everest, rubs off on Graves. The image of a solitary, heroic mountaineer, a romantic representation of mature self-reliance, intrudes for a moment between Graves' account of his school days and his venturing into adult life.

Graves' use of Mallory as a hero is restrained, but even more circumspect is his use of a much more charismatic figure, T.E. Lawrence. Again, the hero's relationship with Graves is based upon a common interest in literature: "poetry, especially modern poetry, was what we discussed most" (page 244). But Lawrence at Oxford is in the same position as Graves, neither an undergraduate nor a don but a man who has just returned from the strife of war to the tranquillity of academe and finds the transition almost impossible. Lawrence's practical jokes and college escapades illustrate the frustrations of a man of action hemmed in by peacetime conventions and parallel Graves' own traumas of adjustment, but Lawrence's wit and poise provide an heroic model to contrast with Graves' more erratic life-style. Graves is careful, then, not to put himself on the same plane as his hero (he professes ignorance of Lawrence's military and diplomatic achievements) but manages to present Lawrence as both an example and an ideal.

With T.E. Lawrence, Graves creates an image of the difficult transition between army service and civilian life; in the same chapter he also displays an image of the next phase of his career in the form of a vignette of the poet Thomas Hardy. The accuracy of Graves' portrait of Hardy has been vigorously attacked,[5] but such attacks ignore the use Graves is making of Hardy in the context

of *Goodbye to All That*. Graves is much less inhibited in using Hardy than in his treatment of Lawrence. Where Lawrence is characterised by his courtesy, infallibility and self-command, Hardy is characterised by liveliness and unconventionality. Graves seems to want the eighty-year-old poet to appear even more unorthodox than members of his own generation. The implication is that Graves' own unconventionality, though it offends his father's generation, has an earlier precedent. Hence Graves' recording of Hardy's comment on Nancy Nicholson's retention of her unmarried name: " 'Why, you are old-fashioned! I knew an old couple here sixty years ago who did the same'" (page 248). Hardy's comments on literature are also meant to confirm Graves' own views, notably his attacks on critics and *vers libre* and his disparagement of his novels, which he claimed to have written by a timetable, whereas "poetry always came to him by accident, which perhaps was why he prized it more highly" (page 249). The vicarious, not to say ventriloquistic, quality of these statements put into Hardy's mouth is surely very apparent.

I have left until last a consideration of the most important hero in *Goodbye to All That*, Siegfried Sassoon. Features already noted are again evident. Graves is drawn to Sassoon initially by a shared interest in literature. As at Charterhouse, this interest is unusual in their situation and it indicates further similarities between the two. They are both educated, sensitive young men caught up in a system alien to them, which they have entered voluntarily with the best of motives, soon to be disillusioned. Graves uses Sassoon, as he uses his other heroes, to express more fully his own position, the isolation they share from both the regular officers at the front and the ignorant civilians in England. And just as Graves' other heroes often go further in rebelling against convention than Graves himself is willing, so Sassoon's protest at the war, though it expresses Graves' own views, is too bold and dangerous for him and has to be circumvented.

Here indeed is the major difference between the treatment of Sassoon and that of the other heroes in *Goodbye to All That*. Whereas in the other cases Graves is an almost passive observer (a role he adopts in other circumstances, notably his account of the war), in the case of Sassoon's war protest Graves takes action which directly affects his hero. His intervention to save his friend from possible court martial is Graves' most independent deed in the whole book and the fact that it affects one of the hero-figures only adds to its ambivalence. Not only does Graves seem to act to defend conventionality from the attack of a hero, albeit in the guise of defending the hero from conventionality, but he does so by conniving with the vulgar view of heroic individualism as abnormality. Graves is of course aware of the paradox: "the irony of having to argue to these mad old men that Siegfried was not sane! Though conscious of a betrayal of truth, I acted jesuitically" (page 216). For a moment Graves balances on the knife-edge between the conventional view of sanity, that it is the normal behaviour of the majority, and the heroic view, implied everywhere else in *Goodby to All That*, that the sane man is he who defies convention and lives instead by his own ideals. The tension between these two views is present throughout

the book. Graves' sympathy with the heroic serves to undermine the conventional, so that the sense of normality is subverted and the final impression is left of a world where there are no norms, where madness and sanity are interchangeable and indistinguishable and where the individual must trust himself, not the majority opinion of his schoolmates, his brother officers or his fellow students and professors. To all those standards of normality one must say goodbye. But that takes courage, and at the moment of Sassoon's defiance of conventional war-fever Graves lacked courage, even vicariously.

It is worth asking why. The answer lies, I think, in the fact that Graves is much closer to Sassoon than he is to the other heroes. They are all older men whom he can admire at some distance. But he does not hero-worship Sassoon in the same way. Indeed, at their first meeting, Graves patronises Sassoon's early war poetry and tells him it will soon change once he, like Graves, experiences real war. In reporting their later discussions about the war, Graves assumes an equality with Sassoon: "we decided not to make any public protest against the war" (page 192), "we were now wondering whether the war ought to continue" (page 201).[6] In addition, Sassoon's position as a poet in uniform is, as I have said, very much Graves' own. When Sassoon exposes himself to retribution for his unconventional attitude to the war, the threat is too close to Graves himself and he acts to protect his alter ego. Sassoon is made to take on the disguise of madness to outwit his enemies, just as Graves did at Charterhouse ("my last resource, to sham insanity, succeeded unexpectedly well" page 40) and as Claudius will do in Graves' novel. For Graves, like Claudius, is no hero but a survivor, and when he acts on behalf of one of his heroes he imposes upon him the behaviour of a survivor. No wonder Sassoon was annoyed with Graves' account of these events when they appeared in 1929.

By means of a series of hero-figures, Raymond Rodakowski, George Mallory, Siegfried Sassoon, T.E. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy, Graves presents successive images of himself in *Goodbye to All That*. Upon them he projects the positive ideals which would seem pretentious if he claimed them for himself. Instead, he appears as a lesser mortal, timid where his heroes are bold, doubting where they are definite, beset by domestic and other mundane trivia where they are free to realise their own individuality. The function of this persona as a medium of contact with the ordinary reader is obvious, but the structure of heroes and hero-worship in *Goodbye to All That* seems, if we look beyond to Graves' life and other writings, to be more than a literary device and to reflect a real need in Graves himself. His quest for models upon which to pattern his existence did not end with the close of the period covered by his autobiography. He continued the search and eventually found what he wanted in the role of poet-lover of the White Goddess. The significant change, perhaps, was the shift of worship from heroes to heroines. At the same time his most successful fiction of the fifteen or so years after *Goodbye to All That* shows him imaginatively extending the empathetic technique of that work. It is an exaggeration to say that *Goodbye to All That* is really the prologue to *I, Claudius,* but that exaggeration perhaps suggests why it is notoriously dangerous to treat Graves' autobiography as a work of simple non-fiction.

Notes

[1] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1977), p. 207.

[2] Fussell, p. 208.

[3] Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (Harmondsworth, 1960), chapters 7 and 8. Page references in brackets after quotations refer to this edition.

[4]This remark is not present in the first edition of *Goodbye to All That*.

[5] For example, in Trevor Johnson "Hardy, Homer and Scott's *Marmion*" in *Thomas Hardy Journal* (May, 1986), p. 52-55.

[6] These two statements appear respectively on pages 290 and 288 of the first edition, in a rather more logical order.

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