

THE THEME OF WAR

During my father's old age I sadly witnessed his gradual loss of memory for immediate things, and simultaneously saw a thick black cloud slowly emerging from the past and engulfing him. It became clear to those of us who were near him that all those unspeakable war horrors to which he had angrily said goodbye in his youthful autobiography were now returning to plague him, with all the force accumulated during more than half a century. He may well have been suffering from nightmares like the one described in "The Castle," written a few years after the war:

Like a corpse in the cholera-pit
Under a load of corpses
Or to run the head against these blind walls,
Enter the dungeon, torment the eyes
With apparitions chained two and two,
And go frantic with fear —
To die and wake up sweating by moonlight
In the same courtyard, sleepless as before.

This first collection of all his war poetry, Poems About War, which includes some hitherto unpublished poems such as "The Patchwork Quilt" should, I think, be regarded as a posthumous tribute to a poet who had the strength and integrity to resist exploiting that unique and horrendous experience which unleashed such profound feelings in his heart. His personal poetic convictions, which he was to maintain all his life, and as a result of which he named the White Goddess the sole inspirer of 'true' poetry, induced him to exclude them from his anthologies after 1927, because, he said, they were written for non-poetic reasons. Whatever their poetic worth, all these poems have now acquired a new testimonial value which overrides Graves' severe self-criticism and enhances them. Like old photographs suddenly re-discovered, they shed a new, more intimate light on his autobiography revealing to what extent he suffered, how he survived and how he underwent the emotional change from school-leaver to adult; the reader is able to see how his poetry grew in strength, precision and individuality as he was forced into a situation where values needed reconsidering one by one in the face of death and measuring in terms of their utility as components of a survival kit. In "An Assault Heroic" he defeats Despair

With my spear of faith,
Stout as an oaken rafter,
With my round shield of laughter,
With my sharp, tongue-like sword
That speaks the bitter word.

"One day, Eddie, I am going to write a really damned good book which won't have to lay itself out to please so many people (like this first) and so will be less of an omnium gatherum and more of a BOOK. But meanwhile, Eddie, I can't thank you enough for all you have done to me both as a friend and as a literary godfather and only hope that in the end when my hand is surer and my observation acuter I shall write something to justify all this.

I feel I have the power."

No date - July 1916:

"It is too touchingly noble of you to devote your rare and precious hours of relaxation to going over my verses! May you find after many days the bread which you have cast upon the waters and be it neither stale nor sopping!"

December 1917:

"Eddie, I am beginning to feel that I know what I'm getting at and in this next year of 1918, if I'm spared, I hope to satisfy the expectations you've had of me since I was a sixteen-year-old at Charterhouse, by doing some work of really lasting value."

Clearly this awareness of his strong poetic vocation and the knowledge that he "had the power" helped Graves survive the war, protecting him like a talisman from death and insanity, and, after demobilization, from the influenza that caused even more deaths than the war itself. True to his teen-age pledge to poetry, shaken by the war but gratefully alive, he then searched for and found his own voice, far from literary tendencies and common causes; and though the poems of the twenties are marked by images which reveal his terrible state of anguish and shell-shock, he was rarely to look back at that period of his life. His admiration for the good soldier and his disapproval of those who violate the code of honour found a prominent place in his prose: it was his way of paying homage to his lost companions and of acknowledging the value of his own military experiences. But in poetry he turned to the one endless theme, and the Goddess smiled at his preference for her, letting him always be her poet.

NOTES

¹Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

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Graves' early war poems still show that youthful enthusiasm — “jolly young fusiliers too good to die” — that had spread among the Georgians after the early death of Rupert Brooke on active service and that had given rise to a veritable boom of war-poetry, reflecting heroic and patriotic feelings that in turn lured more young men to the muddy trenches. The Georgians, moreover, saw yet another justification for the sacrifice: the new poetry. It is in this light that we must read the last two lines of Graves' “A Renaissance”

On Achi Baba's rock their bones
Whiten, and on Flanders' plain,
But of their travailing and groans
Poetry is born again.

much in the same spirit as Sorley's “Earth is bursting into song.”

While still believing in the cause, Graves was “learning to play the butcher's part though the woman screams inside,” and what we learn through his poems is how he uses them as a means of controlling his fear, either by seeking the shelter of childhood, as in the Nursery Memories, or by thinking of home where “swallows dip and wild things go / on peaceful errands to and fro” or by looking forward to the end of war.

As the months drew on the reality of the holocaust produced a unanimous yell of indignation. War poetry took on a bitter and ironic tone, and turned into a passionate protest for the unjustifiable deaths of thousands of young men. In that new and intolerable situation, the need for believing in the future became desperate, and Graves transformed his poetic vocation into his “spear of faith.” Nor did his sense of humour — his “round shield of laughter” — ever abandon him:

Oh that was the right day to die
The twenty-fourth of July
God smiled
Beguiled
By a wish so wild
And let me always stay a child.

In his correspondence with Eddie Marsh, to whom he sent drafts of poems from the trenches, he repeatedly expressed his hope that he would survive the war in order to be able to write better poetry, while he thanked him for his support and encouragement. These extracts from the Marsh correspondence — from the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library — are sufficiently explicit and revealing:¹

June 11th 1916: