

“Hello Again”: A Return to the Themes of *Goodbye to All That*

In his “Preface to First Edition of Poems,” Matthew Arnold asks why the characters of an “exhausted past” seem so much more attractive to a modern audience than contemporary historical figures (Arnold, 206). The answer, according to Arnold, lies in the history of characters from the distant past which are often so inculcated with lore that their actions seem god-like (206). *Count Belisarius* is an account of a brilliant general stylistically rendered in the historical narrative of the late Roman empire. Upon close examination, Graves’ modern and personal conviction surfaces as a subtext suited to his personal vision of the church, the Great War, and corrupt government. It is a thematic refinement of *Goodbye To All That*, which was to be the work that laid Graves’ angst to rest. Eight years later, *Count Belisarius* promotes a subtext illustrating these themes from within the less antagonistic framework of a historical novel.

Graves was first introduced to Belisarius, the historical personage, through a letter from T.E. Lawrence, who wrote,

[Belisarius never fought] an unnecessary battle and never [asked] more of his troops than he [was] willing to give himself—either in reconnaissance or in hand-to-hand fighting. (Difficult, 167)

In order to avoid tainting this unblemished conception, Graves ignored several episodes from the life of Belisarius. Such omissions are clearly intentional as Graves, a passionate historian, had a strong knowledge of the historical background of both the character and the period when he wrote *Count Belisarius*.

Graves allowed himself the poetic license to coerce myth into resembling historical fact. He admits, “I was obliged to fill in the gaps of the story with fiction.” (iv) An example of this is the last chapter of *Count Belisarius*. It is based on the legend that Justinian blinded Belisarius,

...There grew a story that he was blinded by Justinian and reduced to begging in the streets of Constantinople. (Browning, 171)

Thematically, the chapter is focused on the blinding of Belisarius. In the novel, Justinian returns Belisarius’ social and political status. However, the redemption results from public outrage,

The temper of the people was rising and there were disloyal shouts in the streets and demonstrations before the palace... Justinian sent hurriedly for his Chamberlain, and ordered that a pardon be drafted; which he signed, restoring to Belisarius all

his titles and property. (559)

There is no evidence for this story other than legend. As the historian Browning makes clear, Belisarius was redeemed for less poetic reasons:

At any rate nothing was proved against [Belisarius], and six months later the emperor restored him to favour and to the enjoyment of all his dignities and privileges. [Justinian] had probably never seriously suspected [Belisarius]. (164)

Graves, like Browning, based his account of Belisarius’ life on whatever surviving records existed. These accounts include legend. The resulting discrepancies allow Graves to manipulate both character and scene to his thematic conclusions.

Graves points out this relationship between the Church and war as an oxymoron through his parody of Church services in both novels. The Anglican Church still maintained its strong influence on British society during the first half of the 20th century—an influence which became intensified during wartime to help manipulate its nation’s populace. A nation which presumes that God is on its side will be willing to support a war. Throughout history, people’s dependency on religion has been exploited to coerce their trust in the legitimacy of war.

Graves was not fond of the Anglican Church, nor of any other institutionalized religion. He blatantly expresses this opinion in *Goodbye To All That* (207-8). Graves’ disdain for the church is shown repeatedly through the novel. An example of this is the comic scene in which Graves parades his father to church in a wheelchair (165-7). Graves points out, not only did he not want to be in Church because of his own discomfort with religion, but that he attended only to satisfy his parents’ desire to “show off” their battle-weary and wounded son. This passage mirrors the description Graves gives of the grand procession to Saint Sophia’s cathedral and the subsequent service in *Count Belisarius* (127-30). In both cases, the pomp and circumstance are the aspects of the religious service which Graves chooses to accentuate.

Antonina, Belisarius’ wife, has the same attitude toward the Eucharist that Robert Graves presents in his autobiography. Antonina takes the sacrament because, “Against such civilized and sociable Christian functions it would be foolish to bear any grudge, they are merely a quiet variety of the Theatre performances.” (128-9) Graves’ family church-going parade definitely qualifies as a “theatre performance.”

Graves is quick to make the distinction between those

like Belisarius who have an honest belief in God, and those like Justinian who manifest a pagan view of Christianity through the possession of holy icons. These two opposing views on faith are juxtaposed throughout *Count Belisarius*. The differences in approach to religion in this novel are important to note. The more diverse their practice of Christianity, the further apart the characters' personalities appear.

Pious Justinian, who chooses to surround himself with religious gadgets, is far less a Christian than humble Belisarius. For all the pomp and fury of his false faith, Justinian dies:

Squeaking with terror, the voice of the Father of Lies [ringing] through the Palace rooms, in sinister parody of the Scriptures: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' (560)

Another unpopular character in *Count Belisarius* is the eunuch Narses. His religious method is described much like Justinian's:

Narses, by the way, carried about with him, in a gilt shrine, a little glass image of the Virgin Mother of Jesus, which he would consult before undertaking any important step. (379)

Belisarius is above the methods of faith healing and godhead worship. He is quiet in his faith and allows his soldiers to practice their own personal religions. The one divine artifact he treasures is the wooden begging bowl of Saint Bartimaeus. This simple humble bowl inscribed with the words "Poverty and Patience," provides Belisarius with salvation in his time of need (558). Ironically, it is Justinian who first presented this bowl to Belisarius (380). Graves cements the irony by having Belisarius' redemption begin on the steps of the monastery dedicated to the prophet Job (558).

Graves' presentation of religion in *Count Belisarius* is akin to the belief versus faith argument in *Goodbye To All That*. Graves contrasts the actions of the Anglican ministers, who hid well away from the front lines, with the Roman Catholic priests who, as Graves describes, were willing to discard their crosses and take up dead men's rifles in the trenches (158). This comparison furthers Graves' social commentary against the Anglican Church, which was so dominant in British society.

The War had a profound effect on Graves' attitude toward England. Graves and fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon had become thoroughly disillusioned with the Great War within two years of its onset:

We no longer saw the war as one between trade-rivals: its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity

and self-protective alarm of the elder. (*Goodbye 202*)

By the War's end, Graves no longer felt the War had been justifiable. He felt it had been a war of survival for its participants, and a war of profit for the industrialists—a profit, Graves complained, that was not shared with the veterans who most deserved it:

...unemployment all over the country due to the closing of munition factories; of ex-service men refused reinstatement in the jobs they had left when war broke out, of market-rigging, lockouts, and abortive strikes. (236)

Graves relives this bitterness vicariously through Belisarius, whom he presents as an incorruptible character. Belisarius' only weakness is his inordinate obedience to Antonina and Justinian: wife and government.

Procopius' *The Secret History*, which stands in opposition to Graves' conclusions, presents a different point of view. Belisarius is depicted as being selfish by Procopius. Comparing Graves' description of Belisarius' second campaign in Italy to the one Procopius describes provides startling results.

Both Procopius and Graves write that Belisarius undertook the second Italian campaign with his own funds. However, there are varying historical perspectives on Belisarius' attempt to save Rome from a Gothic siege. According to Procopius, Belisarius was corrupt:

At the same time he devoted himself heart and soul to the pursuit of wealth and the unlimited acquisition of illicit gain, on the plea that he had not received a penny from the Emperor. In fact, he plundered indiscriminately nearly all the Italians who lived at Ravenna or in Sicily... (62)

Browning's historical study presents Bessas as the extortionist:

Bessas, the Roman commander, exploited the famine to line his own pocket. Soon there was a strong movement among the starving civilians in favour of surrender to Totila. (125)

Whereas Baker refuses to put the blame on either commander:

Neither the ingenuity of Belisarius nor the caution of Bessas succeeded in saving Rome. (282)

Given that there were discrepancies between historical accounts, Graves could choose whatever version of an event suited his purpose. Since Procopius' version contains character-damaging extortion, it follows that

Graves chose to ignore it. Graves prefers the view that it was Bessas who was guilty:

The veteran Bessas, whom resentment against Justinian's neglect of the Italian situation had soured, was concerned chiefly with enriching himself at the expense of the citizens ... The only grain remaining was in the military granaries. Bessas sold a little of this at a time at increasingly high prices, more and more adulterated with bran—which was to rob his horses, too. (486)

Graves then describes Belisarius' extraordinarily unselfish resolve:

If Rome was to be relieved this must be done by Belisarius's own unaided resources, whatever the odds. (490)

Graves extends his support of Belisarius by claiming the General would have been successful in saving Rome had it not been for the false news which appealed to his regard for human life:

Must he engage the whole Gothic army by himself? That would be foolhardy to the point of madness. Nevertheless he would have done so, in the hope of aid from Bessas as soon as the galleys drew near to the City; but that, with the port taken, he was cut off from the sea—for Otisa was also held by the enemy, and defeat now would be disaster. (494)

The existence of alternate historical reports allowed Graves to construct his own themes while having the backing of historical "truth." When one history showed Belisarius with a character flaw, Graves could reach for another that would maintain the soundness of his legend.

Graves' tone toward Justinian's manipulation of Belisarius implies a criticism of the government, or of any institution for that matter, which tries to impose itself outside its jurisdiction.

In *Goodbye To All That*, Graves describes H.G. Wells' sanitized visit to the so-called front lines:

[Wells] had just been taken for a "Cook's Tour" to France, and staff-conductors had shown him the usual sights that royalty, prominent men of letters, and influential neutrals were allowed to see. (205)

Graves' tone is very resentful. Wells was making money writing about a war in which his only experience was as an observer.

According to Graves, Justinian's interference is analogous to a politician infringing on the military. Baker makes it clear that Narses' arrival in Italy is an extension

of Justinian's political will:

The advent of Narses meant that Justinian was angry, and intended to have his own policy maintained. (179)

Graves exploits the stereotype of a eunuch to his thematic advantage. Narses was sent to Italy as Justinian's representative. Symbolically, Narses is no longer a man. The stereotype dictates that he has no will of his own.

Graves expresses his frustration with non-combatants attempting to lead an army in *Goodbye To All That*. He is equally despondent in *Count Belisarius* while discussing the character of Narses, whom he takes many opportunities to put down:

Belisarius wrote to the Emperor, acquainting him drily with Narses's 'loyal scruples' against deferring to his military judgement... (377)

Indeed, when the news reached [Narses] at Rimini he was so overcome with jealousy that for days... (379)

The irony of it was that Narses was really responsible for the fall of Urbino—and moreover never knew! (380)

Graves could not be more clear. He questions Narses' military judgement, his jealousy, and his lack of accountability. This clearly expresses Graves' opinion that a General must be a soldier—not a statesman.

Graves makes the case for the truth of *Count Belisarius* by questioning the validity of Procopius' document *The Secret History*:

Then Procopius in the bitterness of his heart wrote a book of libels not only upon Belisarius and my mistress Antonina but upon the Emperor himself and dead Theodora. (*Count* 546)

Ironically, Graves defines his own novel by explaining what resulted from Procopius' bitterness:

Sometimes [Procopius] told the truth, sometimes he distorted the facts, sometimes he lied—according to his vindictive purposes. (*Count* 546)

To propose that *Count Belisarius* has vindictive purpose though, would be wrong. Through the subtext, Graves continues his attack on society. However, that attack can only be described as self-rehabilitating, especially when taken in context with the severity of a work such as *Goodbye to All That*.

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