

A Suppressed Poem ('Dear Roberto'): Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Sassoon's verse letter to 'Dear Roberto' reached a wider public than the poet intended when it appeared in a 'garbled and incomplete form'¹ in *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Graves's own autobiographical account of life in the trenches of World War One. Chagrined by its unauthorised and all too public presence, Sassoon objected. Graves's book was hastily withdrawn and reissued without the poem. But it was not suppressed for long. Later that year the poem, again edited by Graves, made another public appearance, printed by 'The Unknown Press.' There were '50 numbered copies with a portrait of the author and 450 copies unnumbered and portraitless.'² The date at the head of the poem was 'A1919D.' In fact the verse letter had been sent to 'Dear Roberto' in July 1918, but Graves was clearly no more concerned about accuracy than authorial sensitivity.

These bare facts in part explain Graves's concocted title ('A Suppressed Poem') and the significance of his cryptic epigraph: "Saul Kain says.... Goodbye to All That.... gravely." For Graves was hereby offering a clue, if clue be needed, concerning Sassoon's role both as author and censor of his own work. Saul Kain had been Sassoon's pseudonym in *The Daffodil Murderer* (1913) and as he later recalled: 'Everyone in Cambridge would be asking who "Saul Kain" really was- and I shouldn't have the smallest objection to their knowing.'³ Now Graves's action, in cocking a snook at Sassoon's 'suppression' of the verse-letter, would test Saul Kain's response to the glare of now unwelcome publicity.

There are other private jokes here. After all, Sassoon, whose relationship with Graves was less cordial by 1929—mainly as a consequence of his liaison with Laura Riding—had effectively said 'Goodbye To All That' by insisting on the withdrawal of his own poem from circulation and with it Graves's offending autobiography. Moreover the poem's central message, as Graves well knew, was one of 'goodbye' to the war, written as it was eleven days after the 'bloody bullet'⁴ had put paid to Sassoon's active service. And the word 'gravely' hints not only at Sassoon's anticipated 'grave' reaction to the unscheduled re-appearance in print of his embargoed verse-letter, but to the poet's scrambled state of mind—'my little inferno'⁵ at the time when he composed it. Other teasing questions surround this literary incident. Why did Graves refer to the verse-letter as 'the most terrible of his war-poems'? Why too did he publish a pirated edition that differs in a number of ways from the original verse-letter sent by Sassoon from his hospital bed in Lancaster Gate? Most important of all, why did Sassoon insist on the poem's 'suppression'? It is possible to speculate briefly about Graves's role in the affair. By advertising the poem as 'the most terrible,' Graves was

probably making the most of his literary coup. To include an unpublished and deeply personal poem by the celebrated war-poet—and eleven years on—was bound to attract attention and boost sales of Graves's memoir. But Graves knew that some aspects of the poem were controversial as well as confessional; his excision of nine lines and the omission of a key name shows that he was aware of the delicate nature of the exposure.

At all events Graves's editing did nothing to assuage Sassoon's feelings or persuade him to lift the embargo on the poem's appearance in subsequent printings of *Goodbye to All That*. In a later edition of his memoir, Graves recalled, in a parenthesis that repeated his earlier judgment about this 'most terrible of his war-poems' that it was one 'which I cannot quote, though I should like to do so.'⁶

Sassoon's 'suppression' is a clear indication that he viewed Graves's opportunistic tactic as unprincipled. It placed in the public domain a verse-letter that was not only private but profoundly self-lacerating. In the poems of *Counter Attack*, Sassoon had characteristically played down his own feelings by the frequent use of irony or by allowing the victims of war to speak for themselves. Here there is no such distancing. Incarcerated in hospital and suffering from insomnia and a nervous exhaustion that rendered him near suicidal ('sleepless exasperucide'),⁷ Sassoon's mind had, on his own admission, 'worked itself into a tantrum of self-disparagement.'⁸ As the posthumously published diaries also confirm, not only had he suffered 'a dose of fever.... which left me rather futile,'⁹ he was besieged by nightmarish memories of 'people being blown to bits' and affronted by 'outbursts of national vulgarity.'¹⁰ As the poem makes all too clear, Sassoon was lurching from one crisis of confidence to another. Being delirious for much of the time clearly did not help.

Nonetheless, even in the garbled and shortened version, there was still plenty that Sassoon clearly wanted to consign to the private realm. For here was a poet, now in 1929 something of a national institution, revealed in the text as a 'wild and wobbly-witted soldier poet,' a man who apparently had not known his own mind in 1918, and who had vacillated between a death-wish, so nearly achieved, and a schoolboyish desire to get back to the glorified rugby match of a war 'Shouting "Back to the Front/For a scrimmaging stunt".'¹¹ Was this the man, now referring to himself as 'the worm that refuses to die'¹² who, less than a year before, had made his courageous statement condemning the needless prolongation of the conflict?

Furthermore the references to Sassoon's private life had been intended for Graves and Graves alone. It would be a

long time before Sassoon took the decision to allude openly in print to his close circle of male friends. Yet the verse-letter's roll-call of hospital visitors referred directly to a number of these boon companions, including Robbie Ross, former confidante of Oscar Wilde and now one of the poet's intimates. And though Graves had removed the reference to 'O Rivers please take me,'¹³ the 'omnipotent grin'¹⁴ of the Craiglockhart psychotherapist remained. Sassoon's hero-worship of his father-confessor was a piece of self-exposure that the poet could hardly have wished on himself eleven years after the event, even if Rivers were by then dead.

Moreover Sassoon must have taken exception to Graves's meddlesome editing. He had, of course, added the cryptic epigraph and the prose passage from *Goodbye to All That* describing the unfortunate accident¹⁵ of 13 July. But more significantly, Graves had excised nine lines— including the despairing and confused final stanza—omitted the name 'Otterleen' (Lady Ottoline Morrell), substituted 'Sassons' (one of Sassoon's nick-names) for 'Dotty Captain'¹⁶ and tinkered here and there with the metrics and line-lengths. To be fair to Graves, one can understand the logic of the major omissions. The rhetoric of 'Why keep a Jewish friend unless you bleed him?'¹⁷ struck a discordant anti-Semitic note. And the final verse, despite what seems to be a deliberate poetic strategy of confusion ('What lovely faces were/The soldier lads he sang')¹⁸ is so unabashedly personal in its

pleading reference to Rivers that Graves for once showed some tact in excluding it.

It is not the purpose of this commentary to make artistic judgments about the verse-letter's merits—though I believe them to be considerable. What is unarguable is the poem's importance. It was Sassoon's farewell to the 'War For Civilization,' the last poem he wrote to be based on an immediate response to his experiences at the front. The accidental bullet that ended his war triggered off a piece that he would otherwise not have written. Nonetheless 'Dear Roberto' opens up a whole Pandora's box of conflicting emotions about the war, emotions that had been tearing Sassoon apart for some time. To an extraordinary degree the verse-letter's formal procedures, as well as its erratic substance, convey a sense of nerves gone 'phut and failed.'¹⁹ But if its frequent shifts of tone and mood, its fractured syntax, its coinages and telescoping do reflect an experiment in expressive form, we should not forget that it is a merciless piece of self-exposure. What self-parody exists in the poem is overwhelmed by the near hysterical nature of a confession pored out to a close and sympathetic friend. Even as it was eleven years on, 'Roberto' did Sassoon a grave disservice—not once but twice—by publishing the verse-letter.

Notes

1. See Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *Siegfried Sassoon, The War Poems* (Faber, 1983) p. 133.
2. End note to UP version.
3. Siegfried Sassoon, *The Weald of Youth* (Faber, 1942).
4. For a fuller account see Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress* (1937, 1940 World Books) pp. 648-50.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 654
6. Headnote to UP version (see 'End Notes to Verse Letter').
7. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929, revised edition, Penguin 1957 p. 227).
8. 'Dear Roberto', 1.17.
9. *Sherston's Progress* p. 654. Many of the details of the poem reappear in Sassoon's prose account.
10. *Diaries 1915-18* p. 277.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
12. 'Dear Roberto', 1.25.
13. *Ibid.*, 1.21.
14. *Ibid.*, 1.54.
15. *Ibid.*, 1.19.
16. 'Accident' in a literal sense. Sassoon had been mistaken for 'enemy' by his own sergeant. See *Sherston's Progress* p. 648.
17. 'Dear Roberto', 1.43.
18. *Ibid.*, 11.27-8.
19. *Ibid.*, 11.57-8.

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