

A ‘Spirit Above Wars’: Robert Graves’s Self-Portrait as Soldier and Poet, 1915–29

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Ask a student audience who ‘the war poets’ were, and you’ll get perhaps six or eight names, one of which will be Robert Graves. And that’s odd, because from 1927 onwards Graves ‘suppressed’ – his word – virtually all the poems he’d published during and soon after the war. The suppression wasn’t quite as complete as critics seem to think: he did allow about twenty poems to be reprinted in anthologies. So, until 1988, when his son William reprinted almost all the war poems, Graves’s status as a ‘war poet’ alongside his friends Sassoon and Owen depended on his prose memoir, *Goodbye to All That*, and whatever of him the anthologists chose to make available.

Most anthologists have presented him – an indeed the whole phenomenon of First War verse – in terms of Sassoon and Owen, especially between the sixties and early eighties, when six 1914–18 anthologies were published (there’d only been two in the previous thirty years). The three most-chosen Graves poems in that period were ‘Two Fusiliers’, which is about his wartime friendship with Sassoon; ‘The Leveller’, which was written in deliberate imitation of Sassoon; and ‘Recalling War’, which was composed some twenty years after the Armistice.¹

In 1966 Edmund Blunden urged Graves to reconsider his war poems, saying they were ‘most original’, though they ‘do not seem to me to coalesce into a “Protest”’.² That comment, very typical of its period, seems to imply that a body of war poems which fails to coalesce into a ‘Protest’ somehow falls short of the ideal. Graves wouldn’t have wanted to get entangled in the ‘Protest’ debates of the mid-sixties. He didn’t reprint the poems – they could safely be left to the anthologists.

In effect he’d replaced his wartime self, the Graves of *Over the Brazier* (1916), *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), the wartime letters

and his unpublished 1918 book, 'The Patchwork Flag', with the Graves of *Goodbye To All That* (1929). Whether he did so in answer to some psychological need is a question beyond my present scope. His more obvious motives were to align himself with the attitudes of the late twenties, make himself seem wiser than he really had been, and write a book that would sell. The result was one of the great books of the war, even if parts of it were, as Sassoon and Blunden thought, 'self-glorification and fictionizing skite'.³

When people complained that a lot of *Goodbye* wasn't true, Graves replied that any true record of the war had to contain a high proportion of error because soldiers had been confused and ignorant. But he was surprised that the book was received as 'a violent treatise against war'.⁴ The character many readers saw, and some still see, in *Goodbye* was even further from his younger self than he'd intended. Commentators on his work usually understand this in theory, but in practice they tend to treat the book as reliable. One has to go back to the wartime poems and letters to find the wartime Graves.

He wrote to a friend in October 1914 that by joining up he was violating all his 'most cherished anti-war principles but [...] "France is the only place for a gentleman now", principles or no principles'. So we can believe his claim in *Goodbye* that he argued for pacifism while he was still at Charterhouse, unusual though that must have been for a public schoolboy at the time. But as soon as Germany invaded Belgium, 'I forgot my pacifism'. 'I entirely believed that France and England had been drawn into a war which they had never contemplated and for which they were entirely unprepared'.⁵ And here, I think, one gets a first example of what Sassoon described as 'fictionizing'. It's part of the myth of the First War that no one expected it and that the volunteers were all touchingly innocent. But no intelligent sixth former could have been unaware of British military preparations before 1914. They were widely discussed and very visible – and Graves himself says he'd heard talk of imminent war with Germany, and been

frightened by seeing army manoeuvres on Salisbury Plain.

As for the schoolboy's supposedly naïve opinion of German aggression, the old man's nearly sixty years later was scarcely altered: answering an American in about 1970 who had accused him of being 'square', Graves said bluntly that the war had been 'started by the German invasion of Belgium, without excuse; we fought to rescue Belgium and our French allies, and we fought honourably throughout'.⁶

Graves had begun writing poetry before he joined the army, but while he was in training at Wrexham in January 1915 he was told by Edward Marsh, the Georgian anthologist, that his style was fifty years out of date. That was a nasty shock, but in February Graves agreed, promising that once 'this ridiculous war' was over he would join the other young Georgians in trying to eliminate the 'obnoxious survivals of Victorianism'. In May he wrote one of his first war poems, 'It's a Queer Time', with, he told Marsh, 'your advice still ringing in my ears'.⁷

Years later, when the Georgians were thoroughly out of fashion, Graves said his new plain style had been learned from the formula for army messages ('Time, place, date – from whom, to whom – who, how, when, where, why – how despatched'). But this too was a Georgian method: Harold Monro recommended in September 1914 that poets should learn from the terseness of military despatches, and Wilfrid Gibson seems to have followed this advice in his first, pioneering war poems soon afterwards. Graves later referred to 'It's a Queer Time' as an example of how supposedly 'realistic' war verse could be written without front-line experience, and he added that Gibson had written 'imitatively' after realism had become fashionable in 1915. This was monstrously unfair to Gibson, who had started producing war poems before there was anyone else to imitate. In fact, Graves seems to have imitated *him* (most obviously in 'Through the Periscope').

Georgian language and the theme of gentlemanly honour are evident in the twelve war poems 'Written Before La Bassée' which form the second part of *Over the Brazier*. La Bassée was

the disastrous attack in September 1915 so vividly described – albeit partly from hearsay – in *Goodbye*. Readers of that account might well imagine the event was a turning-point in Graves's thoughts about the war. Even in 1915 he preferred to gloss over the fact that the most chivalrous poem in the 'Before La Bassée' group, 'The Dead Fox Hunter', must actually have been written *after* La Bassée, because it commemorates the death of Captain Samson during that engagement. It may be that some of the other twelve poems weren't composed until after the September fighting either – three were sent to Marsh in October, for example.⁸

The twelve poems have little to say about 'this silly / Mad war' as a whole. Silly and mad, maybe, and Graves does say – once – that 'To kill and fight is wrong', but he immediately adds, 'To stay at home wronger' ('The Shadow of Death'). The most conspicuous statement of values is 'The Dead Fox Hunter', which describes Samson as 'one who rode straight and in hunting died'; now Heaven must provide him with a Hunt, and 'the whole host of Seraphim complete / Must jog in scarlet to his opening Meet'. Few of the Great War's many patriotic versifiers could have rivalled *that*. The contrast between the poem and the harrowing account of Samson's death in *Goodbye* is a striking example of Graves revising his attitude to the war. Not surprisingly, some of his fellow-officers were 'very sick' at the poem, and he himself described it as a 'rotten thing' in October 1916.⁹ The sixties way of coping with an embarrassing poem by an otherwise approved author was to read it as ironic, but Graves's tribute to Samson, whose courage he greatly admired, must have been meant seriously.

After La Bassée he kept his spirits up by reading and thinking about poetry, planning his first book and imagining what he was going to achieve in the vanguard of the Georgians. He told Marsh in October that 'an inspiration seems to have come to me of what the New Poetry is to be'. Marsh was sending him new publications, including Gibson's *Battle*, which Graves thought 'good, very good indeed compared with the sorry stuff that these armchair poets produce nowadays. The simplicity of the language

pleases me most'. When the second volume of *Georgian Poetry* arrived in December, Graves wrote eight pages of 'delight' to its editor; this letter was lost in the post, so he repeated his praises later, saying the anthology was 'perhaps my most treasured possession out here'. In January 1916 he commented warmly on the leading Georgian, Rupert Brooke: 'his is exactly the language I'm floundering to catch'.¹⁰

He first thought of 'C'est La Guerre' as the title for his book:

It has a laugh and an apology in it and expresses just what I want, an explanation – an excuse almost – for the tremendous change in tone and method and standpoint which you must have noticed between the first and [second parts of the book], a hardening and coarsening and loss of music.¹¹

Meanwhile he'd discovered a poet in his own regiment. According to *Goodbye*, he met Sassoon in November 1915 and showed him some of the poems that were to appear in *Over the Brazier*.

He told me that they were too realistic and that war should not be written about in a realistic way. In return he showed me some of his own poems. One of them began:

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,
Not in the woeful crimson of men slain. . . .

This was before Siegfried had been in the trenches. I told him, in my old-soldier manner, that he would soon change his style.

Sassoon's diary confirms that the two poets did meet in about November 1915. So Graves can't have seen the poem he quotes from – and when he did see it his opinion of it was not as in *Goodbye*. Sassoon didn't write 'To Victory' until January 1916. When it appeared in *The Times* on the 15th, Graves told him it was 'a good piece of work'. 'It was very good I thought', he told Marsh in February. 'It couldn't have been better if he'd been actually in the trenches which he hadn't when he wrote the poem:

that trench-life sucks all the poetry out of one'.¹²

Nevertheless Graves did recommend the new style, although his manner would have been more young-Georgian than old-soldier. Georgian realism didn't yet appeal to Sassoon, who noted in his diary on 2 December that some of Graves's poems were 'very bad, violent and repulsive'. But in February Sassoon went into the line.

There is a common misconception among critics that the 'war poets' started as Georgians and soon had all that nonsense knocked out of them. Actually, for Graves, Sassoon and Owen, finding out what war was really like more or less coincided with their discovery of Georgian poetry, and the new style gave them what they needed – a plain, unrheterical, realistic language in which to express personal, earthy experience. That 'hardening and coarsening and loss of music' which Graves detected in his own work marks an increase, not a decrease, in his commitment to what he saw as 'the New Poetry' (by which he meant Georgian poetry as it was going to be). Just as he read the Georgians with new 'inspiration' after La Bassée – and just as Owen was introduced to Georgian verse by Sassoon while recovering from shellshock – so Sassoon went to the front while his ideas about poetry were being affected by conversations with Graves. All three poets changed their way of writing – but it's not true, despite innumerable statements to the contrary, that the change was caused simply by trench experience.¹³ The starting point was Marsh's advice in January 1915 that Graves should update his style.

Graves passed the advice on to Sassoon, telling Marsh in March 1916 that Sassoon's poems were 'getting infinitely better than the first crop I saw, much freer and more Georgian. What a pity he didn't start earlier!', but in April Sassoon wrote 'Stand-to: Good Friday Morning', which Graves thought rather crude and blasphemous. From now on it was Graves who tended to think of Sassoon's poems as 'violent and repulsive'. Outright criticism of the war seemed to him pointless: it was ungentlemanly and would merely weaken morale. When he remarked in June that his friend

had ‘all at once struck what you have been searching for for so long’, he seems to have been referring to ‘A Letter Home’, a cheerful fantasy in the Roberto manner which Sassoon had written to him in May.¹⁴

The lack of ‘Protest’ in *Over the Brazier* is consistent with Graves’s letters in the first half of 1916. ‘I have learned to worship my Regiment’ (February). ‘I always enjoy trenches in a way, I must confess: I like feeling really frightened and if happiness consists in being miserable in a good cause, why then I’m doubly happy. England’s a good cause enough and the trenches are splendidly miserable’ (March). “‘I want to go home” – to France’ (May, from England). ‘I hear you’ve been risking your precious life again among them craters. I am pleased, damned pleased, you’re doing so well; wish to hell I was with you – go on risking, and good luck. It’s a man’s game!’ (June, from England, to Sassoon in France).¹⁵

In mid-July the two poets met just behind the line and diverted themselves by imagining post-war travels in the Caucasus and beyond, developing the ‘dreams’ Sassoon had started in his ‘A Letter Home’. It’s an indication of Graves’s extraordinary temperament that his ‘Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood’, a reply to Sassoon’s poem, was apparently written in the line next day, only fifty yards from the grisly German corpse described in ‘A Dead Boche’ – and ‘A Dead Boche’ was written immediately after the letter as a postscript. Graves says the bloated corpse was ‘a certain cure for lust of blood’. ‘A Dead Boche’ has usually been regarded as one of his most Sassoonish works, but I think – though I haven’t seen the MS – that it must originally have been aimed at Sassoon, who had longed to kill Germans earlier in the year; only later, I guess, did Graves convert the poem into an attack on warlike civilians by adding four introductory lines. Those four lines were perhaps added at Sassoon’s suggestion; at any rate Graves got rid of them when he reprinted the poem in 1927.¹⁶

Graves was wounded, almost fatally, on 20 July, but by mid-August he was fit enough to order about seventeen titles from

Monro's Poetry Bookshop. 'We're winning this Old War at last, aren't we?' he observed to Marsh, unaware, like most people, of what was really happening on the Somme.¹⁷ By late August he was able to go to Harlech, where Sassoon joined him for a fortnight. In September – by which time the disaster on the Somme was beginning to be known – both poets went to Garsington as guests of Lady Ottoline Morrell.

It wasn't only Graves who rewrote his wartime self. By the time Sassoon came to write his own memoir, *Siegfried's Journey*, he'd quarrelled so badly with his former friend that he left him out of the story altogether. So Sassoon describes himself at Garsington that September as the only soldier in a house full of pacifists. There for the first time, he says, he heard the political case against the war, 'the beginning of a process of disillusionment'. It is only from Ottoline's diary that we know Graves was actually there too: she noted he was 'very possessive of Siegfried'.¹⁸

This Garsington visit isn't mentioned in *Goodbye* either. It didn't suit Graves to reveal that both he and Sassoon had first heard arguments against the war there. Ottoline's comment suggests that even at the time he saw and resented the pacifists' influence on his friend. So, in effect, he replaces Garsington with Harlech, portraying the two poets as already disillusioned when they were there together. Critics seem to have swallowed this, but the details he gives aren't very convincing, nor is his curious statement that he and Sassoon took a 'non-political' view of the war.¹⁹ The reader's attention is distracted by a long satirical note which Graves says he wrote at the time; he doesn't add that he was doubtful about Sassoon's new satirical poems and didn't write any himself. He's preparing the ground for his role in Sassoon's 1917 protest, when the wiser comrade will hurry to the rescue, sharing the protester's views but seeing the futility of political action.

In a further attempt to show the two poets in agreement at Harlech, Graves says they defined the war in their poems 'by making contrasted definitions of peace. With Siegfried it was hunting and nature and music and pastoral scenes; with me it was chiefly children'. Sassoon was annoyed by this claim that he had

been writing lyrics when he'd actually been composing some of his harshest onslaughts on the civilian conscience. *Goodbye* is less reliable than Graves's earlier reminiscence, 'A Letter from Wales' (c. 1924), which records that 'a sense of unreality' began to affect the friendship at Harlech.²⁰

Goodbye places their next meeting at Litherland in November (it was actually in December). Graves says that they 'decided that it was no use making a protest against the war', and that their place was in France with their men (both poets had in fact been thinking of service in Egypt). Sassoon objected to the statement about protesting, telling Blunden he could 'demonstrate what R.G.'s attitude was (timid and conventional) by his letters to me'.²¹

Neither Graves nor Sassoon were just to each other here. Sassoon was in fact beginning to be convinced that protesting might be worthwhile and that it was in any case the only honourable thing to do. Graves on the other hand felt honour-bound to return to France. He was still far from well, but at the end of 1916, with impressive courage, he volunteered to go out again. His trip to the front was his last and least distinguished, although he claims he managed to get an ill-conceived attack called off (it was this story which prompted Sassoon's comment about 'fictionizing skite'). His health soon gave way, and he was sent to recuperate in Oxford.

Now *Goodbye* introduces Garsington, where Graves goes for the first time and hears that 'there was another side to the question of war guilt' (he must really have heard that in the previous September and discussed it at length with Sassoon at Litherland). He adds in passing, rather too casually, that he, like 'most other young writers of the time', no longer believed in the war. He doesn't explain when or why that loss of belief had occurred, and it isn't obvious in his 1917 letters and poems. Sometimes he agreed with Sassoon; sometimes the voice of his Danish grandmother inside him said "'A mort les Boches" and "Delenda est Carthago"'. He told Marsh he was 'very apt to get fainthearted about the War, but I always get back to it as soon as I can again, such a tyrant is old Grandmother'.²² What did he mean by

‘fainthearted’? Simply that he was afraid? Or that he was tempted to agree with Garsington?

He was appalled by Sassoon’s public protest in the summer of 1917 and worked hard to cover it up, although his role was perhaps not quite as decisive as he suggests in *Goodbye*. Sassoon scorned his appeals to “‘good form” and “acting like a gentleman”. [...] If you had real courage you wouldn’t acquiesce as you do’. This was an accusation of cowardice, and Graves’s reply hints that Sassoon himself had been cowardly – or at least ‘fainthearted’ – by dropping out of the fighting. ‘I believe [...] in keeping to agreements when everybody else keeps them and if I find myself party to principles I don’t quite like, in biding my time until I have a sporting chance of rearranging things.’ He would perhaps not have liked to be reminded that earlier in the year he had offered to wangle Sassoon a home posting like his own (‘You’d be stupid not to take it’).²³

It was perhaps because Graves was afraid of being understood as declaring solidarity with Sassoon that he decided not to dedicate his next book to him, despite an earlier promise. He told him he was nervous of offending other individuals who had helped him, and explained, wonderfully unconvincingly, that the final dedication, to the Royal Welch Fusiliers, would ‘strengthen my expression of hatred for the War’.²⁴

The political content of *Fairies and Fusiliers* is minimal and generally orthodox. War is not glorified, but is implied to be inevitable, with all its lies and horrors. Children playing soldiers are told that every generation is doomed to be ‘loyal and true in everything, / [...] / If only to keep safe those joys / That belong to British boys’. Their turn will come to fight in another, even more dreadful war, caused again by the ‘pomp and greed and rage’ of Kaisers and Czars’ (‘The Next War’). ‘The Legion’ describes two Roman officers – who are also Graves and Sassoon in 1916 – vowing to drive the barbarians out of Gaul. ‘Goliath and David’ tells the story of David’s death at the hands of the ‘spike-helmeted, grey, grim’ Goliath. And here I have to differ with critics who have understood this German-uniformed Goliath as a

personification of war, without reference to nationality. Graves's original readers would have recognised the spike-helmeted Prussian ogre of wartime *Punch* cartoons. And David, as the dedication to David Thomas suggest, represents Graves's view of the British volunteers of 1914–15: brave, noble-minded young amateurs standing in the path of a monster which had to be defeated.

Graves confided to Marsh ('Eddie, don't tell anyone') in August 1917, just after Sassoon's protest, that sentencing a conscientious objector to two years in prison had given him a sense of "fiat justicia" not untempered with satisfaction'. In the same month he refused to contribute to an anthology which he suspected would be pacifist in tendency, and he advised Sassoon to refuse as well. Appearing in such a book would 'bring discredit on the dear old Regiment'. By contrast, he had urged Sassoon in April to join him in contributing to E. B. Osborn's more warlike *The Muse in Arms*, proud of the chance to appear alongside Brooke and Julian Grenfell. Interestingly, in view of his later attitude to propaganda, he allowed the Department of Information to use 128 lines from *Fairies and Fusiliers* for a propagandist article on soldier-poets, saying it would be rather a good advertisement, and he advised Robert Nichols to follow other authors who were lecturing in America on Allied war aims.²⁵

Two late 1917 poems record aspects of his frame of mind. 'The Picture Book', which must have been completed by November, when Sassoon read and liked it, describes a sadistic German book Graves had been made to read by his German nanny. Years later he suppressed this piece, partly for its 'anti-German sentiments', but in 1917 it seemed fair (presumably even to Sassoon) and it set up a contrast with the kind of children's book he hoped to produce with Nancy Nicholson, to whom he was about to become engaged. In September he read another new work, 'Night March', to Sassoon, who thought it 'a wonderful thing – his most sustained effort'.²⁶ 'Night March' is another salute to the Fusiliers, the Twenty-third, describing a battalion of them marching twenty-three miles to the Somme – in twenty-three stanzas.

Still proud to be a Georgian, Graves told Marsh he was beginning ‘to understand infinitely more clearly what Georgian poetry means, and what its going to mean by Gods grace’. He was glad to have introduced the two Georgians, Sassoon and Nichols, to each other, and it was he, not Sassoon, who told Marsh of ‘a new poet [...] just discovered, one Wilfred Owen’. He told Sassoon to ‘cheer up [...] Don’t send me any more corpse poems’, and he gave similar advice to Owen, whom he considered to be too much under Sassoon’s influence: ‘For God’s sake cheer up and write more optimistically [...] a poet should have a spirit above wars’.²⁷

An adherent of the gentlemanly code could hardly start married life at home without being classified as permanently unfit. Graves volunteered once more, but he can’t have been too surprised to be told early in January 1918 that he could never fight again. By the end of the month he was married. In February he was sent to train cadets in Wales, where he and Nancy took a farmhouse, Bryn-y-pin.

The little rhymes that he wrote in the early months of his marriage may now seem trivial, but he took them seriously, believing he had found his true medium. If they were an attempt to forget, they were none too successful: themes of haunting, fate and death kept recurring. So did poems about the war: in ‘The Survivor Comes Home’ he confessed that the woods seemed to drip with death, as Mametz Wood had done in 1916. But he told Sassoon he was ashamed of the contrast between his own circumstances and his friend’s – for in the previous December Sassoon had made the decision *Goodbye* attributes to both poets at Litherland a year earlier, that protesting was useless, and he had gone back to be with his men.

Sassoon wrote an angry letter in June, saying Graves was incapable of ‘writing deeply’. Graves replied stoutly on the 9th: ‘[...] blast you, you old croaking corbie, aren’t I allowed for the honour of the Regiment to balance your abysmal groanings with my feather top rhymes and songs?’ And a few days later, to show he could croak just as well as Sassoon if he’d a mind to, he wrote

‘The Leveller’ (‘a trench poem [...] to show you I could write just like you’).²⁸

‘I’ve almost got the new book together [...] it will be damned good in spite of occasional corpses that blunder up among the nursery toys. It shall be called *The Patchwork Quilt*, I think [...]’. ‘The Patchwork Flag’, as it was finally called, was complete by early August. Of the typescript and carbons, presumably made by Nancy at Bryn-y-pin, a single copy survives among Marsh’s correspondence in the Berg Collection, unnoticed for perhaps forty years by the army of Graves researchers. It is the only record of his output from late 1917 to July 1918. In the end, eleven of the forty-three poems were never published, including ‘Night March’, ‘The Survivor Comes Home’ and another verse letter to Sassoon.²⁹

This ‘Letter to S.S. from Bryn-y-pin’ is a response to Sassoon’s anger in June. Its title echoes that of the 1916 ‘Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood’. It opens with sympathy for Sassoon, ‘Last of the flock, poor Fusilier’. Graves pleads ‘*Guilty*’ to the charge that he’s been writing lightweight verse and trying not to think about the war.

‘*Guilty*’ I’ve no excuse to give
While in such cushioned ease I live
With Nancy and fresh flowers of June
And poetry and my young platoon,
Daring how seldom search behind
In those back cupboards of my mind
Where lurk the bogeys of old fear,
To think of you, to feel you near
By our old bond, poor Fusilier.

Not much ‘self-glorification and fictionizing skite’ in that. Graves is movingly honest.³⁰ But his attitude is very different from Owen’s, who had written only a week or two earlier that ‘All a poet can do today is warn’.

Fewer than a quarter of the poems in ‘The Patchwork Flag’ are

about war, and most of these are grouped in an awkward lump near the beginning. What had been a lively interplay between ‘Fairies’ and ‘Fusiliers’ in the 1917 volume now becomes an uneven ‘patchwork’, the failure of organisation reflecting Graves’s shellshock. That his political view of the war was still largely unaffected by arguments heard from Sassoon and Garsington seems to be apparent in ‘Peace’, written no later than June, in which he imagines the countryside after the war and wonders whether the spectre of militarism could return. Will the German eagle be caged and the British lion tamed –

Or will the young of that vile brood,
The young ones also, suck up blood,
Unconquered, unashamed,
Rising again with lust and thirst?

It would be reassuring, and perhaps correct, to assume that Graves is here referring to warmongers on both sides. Yet this may be another poem that is easily obscured by modern assumptions. In the early summer of 1918 Graves would have been well aware that most British people would understand the ‘vile brood’ to be the German race. The newspapers were full of such phrases: Germans were represented as lustful, shameless and bloodthirsty, and there was a growing suspicion that the politicians wouldn’t press on to a complete victory, thereby leaving the enemy ‘unconquered’. Graves’s lines are open to that kind of reading, and the language has rather more in common with the rhetoric of that nastiest of jingo journalists, Horatio Bottomley, than with the 1918 work of Sassoon and Owen.

Sassoon liked several of the poems in ‘The Patchwork Flag’ – including, not surprisingly, ‘The Leveller’ – but he felt the book as a whole lacked ‘guts’ and ‘passion’. Graves replied that ‘poetry shouldn’t be all propaganda because a war is on’.³¹ Nevertheless, he told Marsh in January 1919 that he had scrapped the book and finished with ‘the Fusilier kind of poem’, and a few years later he acknowledged that Sassoon had kept him from publishing ‘a very

bad book’.

As soon as the war was over, Graves told Sassoon that ‘Now is the time for real vigorous action in doing down the capitalists and politicians and the blokes who have gambled away our lives and money in this war – Are you standing for parliament [...]?’ But he had no intention of joining Sassoon as an active socialist, and he never had much sympathy for the ‘Bolshevism’ and ‘anti-militarism’ he thought his former comrade had been taught at Garsington. ‘I am holding up your old sentimental letters from Fricourt and Arras to blackmail you with if you get narsty’, he told Sassoon early in 1919. ‘Did you ever find heroics in my handwriting?’³² Sassoon could have replied that he’d found plenty.

Looking back from 1929 Graves must have seen his earlier self as something of an embarrassment. It was time to say goodbye to all that. He’d been a Georgian, fervently committed to the Georgian cause, but now the critics, himself among them, were inclined to deride everything Georgian. He’d thought Sassoon’s protest ungentlemanly and had helped to cover it up, but now Sassoon’s outspokenness seemed more honourable than his own reticence. He’d been anti-pacifist and anti-German, and had described war as ‘a man’s game’, but now many people thought Britain had been almost as much to blame as Germany – and that code of honour he’d put so much faith in was coming to be regarded as one of the war’s causes. Despite his continuing devotion to his regiment, his military record had not been especially glorious. So he retold the story, concealing his Georgian origins, portraying himself as in step with – even ahead of – Sassoon’s scepticism, and adopting a cynicism which belonged more to the late twenties than to 1914–18.

Much of this article may seem a story of conformism and even deception. But these are among the skills of survival. Not all poets could ‘Protest’ and ‘warn’. Shellshocked, burdened with dreams and guilt, Graves survived, with his characteristic energy only temporarily dimmed. For this chameleon poet with ‘a spirit above

wars', a career as a great writer was only just beginning.

Dominic Hibberd has published biographies of two poets, Wilfred Owen and Harold Monro, and editions of their poems; *Owen the Poet*, a critical study; *Wilfred Owen: The Last Year*; and various editions, anthologies, and articles.

NOTES

Abbreviations

BIS	Robert Graves, <i>But It Still Goes On: An Accumulation</i> (London: Cape, 1930)
EM	Edward Marsh
GT	Robert Graves, <i>Goodbye to All That</i> (London: Cape, 1929). Page references are to the third (November 1929) edition.
GT(A)	The copy of the first edition of <i>Goodbye</i> dated 7 November 1929 by Edmund Blunden and annotated by him and Sassoon (Berg Collection)
IBI	<i>In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946</i> , ed. by Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982)
MS-S	Martin Seymour-Smith, <i>Robert Graves: His Life and Work</i> (London: Hutchinson, 1982)
PAW	Robert Graves, <i>Poems About War</i> , ed. by William Graves (London: Cassell, 1988)
RG	Robert Graves
RPG	Richard Perceval Graves, <i>Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895–1926</i> (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986)
SS	Siegfried Sassoon

This article is based on a paper given at the Robert Graves Centenary Conference, St John's College, Oxford, in 1995. I have rewritten several passages in the light of very helpful comments from Dunstan Ward.

Quotations from letters: published sources are given below where applicable. I have accepted editors' amendments, but in almost all cases I have seen the MSS, which are in the Berg Collection, New York

Public Library. Some of my quotations are, I think, published here for the first time.

¹ Anthologies edited by Brereton (1930), Nichols (1943), Gardner (1964), Parsons (1965), Hussey (1967), Black (1970), Silkin (1879), Balcon (1985). ‘Two Fusiliers’ is in six of these, ‘The Leveller’ in four, and ‘Recalling War’ in three. (More recently, Graves’s place as a ‘war poet’ has become less certain. Two anthologies – Stephen (1988) and Roberts (1998) exclude him altogether. Motion (2003) chooses only ‘The Legion’. The widest selections are in Hibberd/Onions (1986) with seven poems and Walter (2004) with eight. Giddings and Hudson (both 1988) have three each. ‘Two Fusiliers’ is in three of these last four anthologies, as is a new favourite, ‘Goliath and David’. ‘Recalling War’ is in two, but ‘The Leveller’, interestingly, is in none.

² IBI, 173.

³ GT(A), 300. SS’s comment is provoked by one anecdote, but is applied to the book’s stories in general. Blunden’s comments are equally harsh.

⁴ BIS, 41–42 (error), 16 (treatise).

⁵ RPG, 117 (principles); GT, 88 (argued), 99 (unprepared).

⁶ MS-S, 564.

⁷ IBI, 30 (Victorianism), 33 (advice).

⁸ BIS, 155 (messages); Monro, *Poetry and Drama* editorial, September 1914. Gibson’s first two war poems were published on 17.10.14. RG, *The Common Asphodel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), 308 (imitatively); PAW, 50 (Periscope).

⁹ RG to EM, 18.7.17 (sick), 18.10.16 (rotten).

¹⁰ RG to EM, n.d. [October 1915] (inspiration), 10.11.15 (Gibson), 24.2. [16: letter dated 1915 but written from Le Havre, where RG was posted in early 1916] (treasured); C. Hassall, *Edward Marsh* (London: Longmans, 1959), 380 (floundering).

¹¹ IBI, 41.

¹² GT, 224 (crimson); RG to SS, n.d. [January 1916] (piece); RG to EM, 9.2.16 (sucks).

¹³ One of the *Over the Brazier* poems, ‘Big Words’, is sometimes taken as an example of how trench experience led to a change of style, because RG added the deflationary final couplet after La Bassée. But the couplet is thoroughly Georgian and Brooke-like in style and effect.

¹⁴ RG to EM, n.d. [summer 1917]: ‘you are responsible for giving me advice which I passed on to him’. RG continued such advising, telling SS on 13.9.17 to ‘make the plain words do the work of the coloured ones’. Both poets gave similar Georgian advice to Owen. IBI, 44 (crop); D. Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 116 (morale); IBI, 52 (struck).

¹⁵ IBI, 39 (February), 43 (March), 51 (May), 51–52 (June).

¹⁶ IBI, 58 (yards). PAW, 83: when RG reprinted ‘A Dead Boche’ for the last time in 1927, he dropped the opening lines and restored the poem to what I assume to have been its original role as a postscript (his word) to the ‘Letter’. However, Dunstan Ward tells me the MS evidence is inconclusive.

¹⁷ RG to EM, 14.8.16.

¹⁸ *Siegfried’s Journey* (London: Faber, 1945), 22 (process); RPG, 162 (Ottoline). Jean Moorcroft Wilson tells me the Garsington visit must have been very brief; even so, it would have been an eye-opener for RG.

¹⁹ GT, 288. Among the unconvincing details is RG’s assertion that he and SS talked about the Lloyd George coalition: the coalition hadn’t yet happened.

²⁰ GT(A), 287 (annoyed); PAW, 72 (Wales).

²¹ GT(A), 112. SS adds that RG ‘definitely disapproved of my stronger war poems’. Several of SS’s other annotations accuse RG of timidity.

²² GT, 307 (writers); RG to EM, n.d. [summer 1917].

²³ SS, *Diaries 1915–1918*, ed. by R. Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983), 192 (acquiesce); IBI, 85 (sporting); RG to SS, 12.5.17 (stupid).

²⁴ RG to SS, 13.9.17.

²⁵ RG to EM, 25.8.17 (justicia); IBI, 81 (discredit); RG to SS, 27.4.17 (Osborn); RG to SS, n.d. [from Wimbledon] (the propagandist article was by Sturge Moore); IBI, 89 (Nichols).

²⁶ RG to SS, 20.11.17 and n.d. [from Islip] (‘The Picture Book’); SS to EM, 22.12.17 (‘Night March’).

²⁷ RG to EM, n.d. [December 1917] (grace); IBI, 90 (Owen), 87 (corpse); *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 596.

²⁸ IBI, 95 (corbie), 98 (‘Leveller’).

²⁹ For the typescript and its history, dates of poems references to letters, etc., see my “‘The Patchwork Flag’ (1918): An unrecorded book by Robert Graves’, *Review of English Studies*, xli,164 (1990), 521–32.

³⁰ Dunstan Ward is surely right in suggesting that the deep feeling in this poem partly comes from RG's recognition that his friendship with Sassoon can never regain its former intimacy.

³¹ RG may have passed his opinion of Sassoon's 'propaganda' on to Owen, who said in December 1917 that for SS poetry had become 'a mere vehicle of propaganda' – a surprising comment, considering Owen's intense veneration for SS during the autumn of that year.

³² RG to SS, November 1918 (blokes); IBI, 106 (sentimental).