

# **Actuality and Imagination: The Poet as Eye-Witness**

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It could be said, in the broadest terms, that poetry represents an eye-witness view for us to use – as an imagined way into the poet's view of the world, as an intellectual and emotional stimulus, a way of discerning human truths and something of the poet's concepts and feelings. Tales of the ancient past come down to us through the medium of poetry, human nature is mediated and illuminated through poetry: we learn about ourselves through the light cast by a poet's words.

I am very conscious of this significance of linguistic power when translating texts from French to English and how difficult it is to pass on the insights of a writer's work in transferring it into another language. My work is generally concerned with fact rather than fiction or poetry, and I must attend to clarity and ease of reading to transmit factual knowledge – for this purpose, elegance of expression cannot be the first concern: the challenge is one of recreating the particular intent, skill and perception of the individual poet, the almost impossible task of presenting poetry across the linguistic divide.

There is however a specific aspect of poetry that we turn to in certain cases and contexts, when our chosen poets, of any age or style, reveal human nature to us and perhaps help to illuminate our own nature or personality. And if we trust them in this respect, we can also use them as our guides to the world outside ourselves, to what they have witnessed. In that sense, of course, we come round to the 'storyteller' poet, the recorder and teller of tales to suit our own taste (who may also be a lyric or dramatic poet, traditional or avant-garde); and it can be intriguing to consider what is recalled through this medium, and the words in which we tell each other our histories or legends.

The work of the people whom we generically describe as ‘the war poets’, concerned particularly with the First World War, are a particular sub-species in this respect, for we have and recall many descriptions of past wars and significant events, in poetic form, but how many of these poetic histories come from participants in the actual event? And how truthful are they – can they be relied on as historical evidence or are they the distant onlooker’s comprehension, or a propaganda view, morale-boosting or patriotic glorification? That’s not a question for this essay, but it is worth considering how our view of history is affected by literary mediation: after all, if it were not for Tennyson, who – apart from the specialist – would now talk about the Charge of the Light Brigade?

I have been struck by the similarities between translation, this exercise of making material available across the linguistic divide, and the advantage of making a direct link, in the context of the First World War and its English literature, between the lived experience of the war and the poet’s distillation of its effect on his mind and memory.

Looking at the poet as witness to history offers a further layer of examination of the writer’s work, with its own merits as well as its limitations. On the one hand, a poem or other work may contain a vast amount of accurate background description, adding verisimilitude to a narrative based on personal experience – but it may be over-written, under-written, difficult to grasp in its atmospheric incident or character picture, and so we may perceive the story or theme but not be persuaded by the surrounding circumstances; on the other, we may have a wholly persuasive piece of work that engages our attention and our sympathies – but which is seriously inaccurate in terms of fact or interpretation and therefore turns easily into pro- or anti- psychological persuasion. We need, in fact, to consider what we want from the poet, from a particular item, whether we are enjoying it as a piece of pure literature or as a way to hitch a ride on the writer’s experience and imagination, to extend our own.

This is the basis for a ‘consumer protection’ warning about using poetry, novels and personal memoirs of the war as evidence: the preferred interpreter of events and emotions can be very revealing of the selector’s preferred approach; it is not a matter of neutral observation but of choosing the presenter to whose personality and style one responds most directly, perhaps to their particular way of life. This, no doubt, is why most ‘military’ historians look with great distrust on the concept of using personal creative material as supporting evidence.

Yet we need the personal approach: we no longer have veterans with personal anecdotes or comments, nor even their living silence, a comment in itself. We still have children of the survivors, passing on first-hand anecdotes heard in their early years, and we see the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the men of 1914–1918 visiting graves and examining the landscape. As the history of 1914–1918 shifts to a kind of national epic, we should recognise the strength of poetic and mythic legacy – and remember that there is truth enshrined, or encoded, in myth. We may consider ‘the Western Front’ as a state of mind, not simply a vanished physical line, and we need a guide to this lost world. We may turn to Julian Grenfell and his ‘big picnic’ descriptions of war, or Noel Hodgson’s ‘Before Action’ as he prepared to die on 1 July 1916, or we may warm to Charles Sorley’s view of Rupert Brooke as having taken ‘the sentimental view’ with his famous sonnet ‘The Soldier’, or indeed to Graves, who recognises the range of approach available with his short poem ‘The Last Post’, written on sick leave:

The bugler sent a call of high romance –  
‘Lights out! Lights out!’ to the deserted square.  
On the thin brazen notes he threw a prayer,  
‘God, if it’s *this* for me next time in France ...  
O spare the phantom bugle as I lie  
Dead in the gas and smoke and roar of guns,  
Dead in a row with the other broken ones

Lying so stiff and still under the sky,  
Jolly young Fusiliers too good to die.’<sup>1</sup>

The row that erupted when *Good-bye to All That* was published, with furious correspondence in the *Daily Mail* and other newspapers, showed the great gulf between two approaches to recording the war – between those who preferred not to dwell on the more disastrous or ridiculous incidents, and those who saw much of the war as something so wholly ‘absurd’ (to use an expression from later in the twentieth century) that it was beyond satire, beyond a joke, the approach that continued into treatments of the Second World War with books such as Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* trilogy, or Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*.

Graves says frankly that he wrote *Good-bye to All That* to make money, and therefore put in everything that would be dramatically interesting or controversial: in terms of the modern media, he had a wonderful publication period and responded briskly to criticisms (including from his own family) via the columns of the *Daily Mail* (thereby using the publicity of disapproval to further his own cause in a way which is very familiar in the twenty-first century). But his vivid and mocking descriptions, full of black humour and desperate jauntiness, met with greater warmth among the men in the ranks; and their approval confirms more clearly than the officially ‘historical’ account what it is that war can do to the human mind and body. In fact, Graves made a considerable contribution to shaping modern attitudes to warfare and what it does to both soldier and civilian.

It has been said that a major war requires a full century for its full effects to be felt, and the greatest part of that effect occurs during the final quarter of the hundred years – that is to say, we have now reached that period in relation to 1914–1918, as we enter an immense series of centenaries of the war years. The ninetieth year anniversary commemorations in France and elsewhere were a modest preparation for what awaits us in 2014–2018!

Where the military or political historian answers the question ‘What happened and why?’, the poet and the novelist writing from personal experience answers, in his own way, the question ‘What did it feel like?’. When we read our chosen ‘literary’ reporters – poets, novelists, memoir-writers – we are making a deliberate decision to see the war through the eyes of these particular, and highly individual, narrators; they become our personal guides and we look at the war through their eyes until, perhaps, we feel we are coming closer to reality. We grant ourselves this extension of our personal imagination and feel that we, somehow, can have a share in what happened.

We can read Edward Thomas, watching from his observation post early in April 1917, just before the Battle of Arras, and writing home to say:

The pretty village among trees that I first saw 2 weeks ago is now great ruins among violated stark tree trunks. But the sun shone & larks & partridges & magpies & hedge-sparrows made love & the trench was being made passable for the wounded that will be harvested in a day or two ...<sup>2</sup>

and we can still easily identify the French hillside that he watched, even though houses and factories are beginning to blur its outlines; we can recall his words, written while he was training soldiers but before he came to France himself, full of foreboding, about the English landscape that he loved – as in ‘As the team’s head brass’, on the effects of the war on ordinary life in England. Unlike many of those who enlisted, Edward Thomas seems to have understood what was waiting for him, but he recognised the personal drive towards a personal contribution: when a friend asked him what he was fighting for, he stooped and picked up a handful of earth, saying as he held out his hand with the crumbling soil in it, ‘Literally, for this.’<sup>3</sup>

Andrew Motion has said of Edward Thomas that

[His] distinction as a war poet is his ability to interpret the conflict of 1914–18 as the particularly horrendous manifestation of a more general historical process. He did not see it as an isolated event, but as one which dramatised long-standing tensions, and intensified existing challenges to the structure and distribution of society.<sup>4</sup>

In the low-lying fields of Flanders, around Ypres, Edmund Blunden emerged from a cheerful and noisy troop entertainment which he describes in his poem ‘Concert Party: Busseboom’: laid on at a farm close to the front line (still identifiable but necessarily rebuilt later) to refresh and distract the weary troops, it was a music-hall entertainment of song, dance and broad comedy. He tells us in the poem of how the audience emerged, relaxed and full of good humour – and saw, as they met the cold winter air, ‘another matinée’, a barrage of red lights in the sky, noisy, that ‘Called madness’: ‘Come, my bonny boy, / And dance to the latest air’. He defines the location of this display of gunfire, seen here as an alternative form of ‘entertainment’, watching across the landscape redefined for them with English names for military use:

To this new concert, white we stood;  
Cold certainty held our breath;  
While men in the tunnels below Larch Wood  
Were kicking men to death.<sup>5</sup>

Today’s traveller, armed with map and field glasses – like those officers of almost one hundred years ago – can stand outside the farm where in Blunden’s poem ‘The stage was set, the house was packed’ and gaze across the peaceful fields to the church spire close to the trees that still identify the site of Larch Wood: so we can estimate the scale of the barrage that caught their attention and lit up the sky, and think of what it signified under the exactly identifiable fields.

In his letters home, Wilfred Owen wrote of his first experience on the Somme front line in January 1917, about ‘those fifty hours’ under bombardment that were ‘the agony of my happy life’, of a sentry outside his concrete shelter who was ‘blown down and [...] blinded’, of lying ‘in the snow under the deadly wind’ a few days later where ‘the marvel is that we did not all die of cold’;<sup>6</sup> these sites too are precisely identifiable and easily accessible: we can look at the field and open hill-tops, then read ‘The Sentry’ in which he describes the ‘old Boche dug-out’ where ‘shell on frantic shell / lit full on to, but never quite burst through’ and the ‘rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime / kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour’, or ‘Exposure’, with ‘the merciless iced east winds that knife us’ with an internal image of the front-line slopes where he first encountered the facts of death.

Similarly, although Owen records that he ‘got overtaken by GAS’ without ill effect,<sup>7</sup> he saw at first hand what exposure to gas did to others: like the incidents and atmosphere recorded in other poems, his own encounter was not recorded in the official battalion diary – but the eye of memory did not fade and he was able to bear witness to the effects of gas in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’. The picture is vivid not only because Owen, by the time he wrote the poem months later, had learned how to express his experiences (and thereby to release himself from some of their distressing after-effects) but also because he is writing about what he had seen and records for us, visually and psychologically: it is an accurate description of the physical effects of being gassed, challenging ‘the old lie’ of the nobility of death in war and also reflecting his urgent need to transmit an understanding of what the war was doing to its combatants.

There is of course also the point that poets, creative people, felt isolated if they could not identify kindred spirits around them. In March 1916, Robert Graves wrote about the difficulty he and Sassoon had in talking about poetry, because of the great curiosity and suspicion this aroused in other officers of the battalion. It is ironic that when *Good-bye to All That* was published Sassoon and

Blunden were out of sympathy with Graves and exchanged minutely detailed letters about misrepresentations of fact, however unimportant; the difference between factual accuracy and the truthfulness of fundamental observation of conditions and atmosphere was temporarily lost. It is also ironic that these three figures are among the very few whose work is widely honoured today for both their *reportage* and their poetic creativity.

The urgent need to find a kindred spirit continued into much later decades; we are used, now, to seeing the press calling on the memory of these poets of the First World War whenever warfare is under discussion, particularly when British troops are in danger; and in 1939 Edmund Blunden, frantic with anxiety about the approach of a fresh war, summoned up the spirit of Wilfred Owen – a poet of his own war whose work he edited in the early 1930s but who he never met:

To W.O. and his Kind

If even you, so able and so keen,  
And master of the business you reported  
Seem now almost as though you had never been,  
And in your simple purpose nearly thwarted,  
What hope is there? What harvest from those hours  
Deliberately, and in the name of truth,  
Endured by you? Your witness moves no Powers,  
And younger youth resents your sentient youth.

You would have stayed me with some parable,  
The grain of mustard seed, the boy that thrust  
His arm into the leading dike to quell  
The North Sea's onrush. Would you were not dust.  
With you I might invent, and make men try,  
Some kindly shelter from this frantic sky.<sup>8</sup>

Siegfried Sassoon writes in his diary of accompanying his battalion, in the earliest days of the Battle of the Somme, through

a village just captured and seeing soldiers' corpses piled along a roadside, some of them 'side by side on their backs with bloodily clotted fingers mingled as if they were hand-shaking in the companionship of death' and, later, publishes 'The Road', with 'Here where they died/Are stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs,/And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight'; we see this introspective country lover, in a landscape that he appreciates deeply for its beauty and openness and admires for its rural life continuing remarkably steadily against the circumstances of war, coming to grips with the brutal facts of a war that is destroying the countryside it is designed to liberate. Sassoon published his collection of war poems, 1915–1917, under the title *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* – a carefully chosen title, as he explains elsewhere, in that it would attract readers who would not expect to find war in its pages: it was a way in which he could catch the attention of his readers, to tell them what he felt they should know, could express what he urgently needed to impart.

We can follow Sassoon throughout his life at war, tracing the realities expressed in his diaries and his fictionalised autobiography, and fortunately we can encounter him on the Somme, where he and Graves were present together in the spring and summer of 1916.

In his writing – *Undertones of War* and its poems, and in many later poems – Edmund Blunden reveals his acute sensitivity to both nature *and* humanity at war – observing the minutiae of the countryside around him in France and Flanders, the trenches, training establishments and observation posts, seeing human nature at its best and worst (although he, unlike Graves, tends to record the better aspects of human nature in these awful surroundings). Indeed, his personal language and style is so reticent that the intensity of his experiences is not always immediately apparent: gentle humour or self-deprecation may blur the first reading of a terrible incident – but when the setting is known and the full story understood, the ultimate impression is all the stronger for this quiet presentation. Seeing the calm productive

landscape that he first saw in the destruction of battle, we can appreciate the jarring contradictions that he felt in essentially peaceful settings but surrounded by war. In later years Blunden wrote poignantly about his weariness, the aftermath of war, the impossibility of getting away from it – indeed it was his constant and daily companion in thought, to the end of his long life. In *Undertones of War* he wrote in prose of the incidents, disasters and unexpected humour of life at war; in his poems, then and later, he wrote of what the war had done to him as a survivor – and we can appreciate this understanding, this long echo of the war, when we see his wartime landscape as in ‘1916 seen from 1921’ when he was still only twenty-five:

Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,  
I sit in solitude and only hear  
Long silent laughers, murmurings of dismay,  
The lost intensities of hope and fear;  
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,  
On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags,  
The very books I read are there – and I  
Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags

Its wounded length from those sad streets of war  
Into green places here, that were my own;  
But now what once was mine is mine no more,  
I seek such neighbours here and I find none.  
With such strong gentleness and tireless will  
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,  
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,  
And the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.<sup>9</sup>

If we think of a young man with these feelings, and can visit the same landscape even in its modern peaceful state, we can begin to direct our imagination towards the frame of mind that was imprinted on him by these experiences of warfare.

Most French people, unless they are already very well informed about the Great War, are surprised to learn the extent to which many English-speaking people's concept of the conflict is rooted in a body of poetry, memoirs and fiction; but it is interesting to observe the increasing number of French publications about *La Grande Guerre* in recent years – fiction, memoirs and, above all, a quantity of social history based on the First World War as the turning point, the single most significant element, in their twentieth century. As we have observed in Britain, this marks the war's shift in collective memory, from 'grandad's tales' to 'history', the wider background to everyone's modern life, and also its emergence from the occluding memories of the Second World War.

From the British point of view, the war took place in a foreign land, with virtually no physical manifestations visible on British soil – except the aftermath, the thousands of war memorials of every kind, in virtually every community, in so many thousands of public buildings, churches, schools and other sites. To explore the war physically, to give our minds and imagination a visual setting, the British must visit foreign ground where they can see the landscape and, in particular, visit ordered cemeteries full of the hundreds of thousands of British dead.

It is an immensely powerful concept and experience, working on the imagination of even those who would deny any tendency to being susceptible to a 'literary' or (in a pejorative sense) 'intellectual' approach to history, and it lends itself easily to literary mediation – the lost warrior who remains buried in foreign soil, who fought for the liberation of territory that was not his own, a society reshaped by violent events in other lands. And, in so many cases, the warrior was not originally a soldier. It is significant that the great majority of the writers whose work forms our memories in this way were not career soldiers; whatever their original occupation, they chose to fight, to risk their lives, submitting by choice to the hazards of war – and that, I think,

affects their approach to writing about the war, and ours in reading their work.

Poetry went to war with a huge number of men, as a condensed form of distraction and reassurance, and warfare was often a subject of that poetry – they read it and, in huge numbers, they wrote it; what could be more normal, in that era and in a frequently static war, than for men of all conditions and backgrounds to express their feelings in poetic form? But however vivid and accurate a writer may be, we must be wary of what he shows us as historic truth: a dangerous phrase. Samuel Hynes, in his thoughtful and illuminating book *The Soldiers' Tale* – about the ordinary soldier's experience of war throughout the twentieth century – quotes from *Good-bye to All That*. Graves is a useful witness to both sides of the accuracy argument – the book's publication in 1929 caused an outcry, partly because it was outspoken and briskly offensive to a number of individuals and units but also because it was evidently inaccurate in a number of details. Writing in the 'Postscript', *But It Still Goes On*, Graves commented :

It was practically impossible (as well as forbidden) to keep a diary in any active trench-sector, or to send letters home which would be of any great post-War documentary value; and the more efficient the soldier the less time, of course, he took from his job to write about it. Great latitude should therefore be allowed to a soldier who has since got his facts or dates mixed. I would even paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities. High-explosive barrages will make a temporary liar or visionary of anyone; the old trench-mind is at work in all over-estimation of casualties, 'unnecessary' dwelling on horrors, mixing of dates and confusion between trench rumours and scenes

actually witnessed.<sup>10</sup>

As Hynes goes on to say of the personal record:

True but not truthful [...]. Personal narratives are not history and can't be; they speak each with its own human voice, as history does not, and they find their own shapes, which are not the shapes of history. They are neither better nor worse, neither more nor less valuable than history; they are simply different.<sup>11</sup>

The validity or otherwise of the torrent of complaints stirred up by the publication of *Good-bye to All That* is not a topic for this article; but elsewhere we can occasionally see Graves in the eyes of others, to set alongside his self-presentation. In his valuable anthology work, *The War the Infantry Knew* – which was assembled and published at least in part because of the perceived inaccuracies and injustices in *Good-bye To All That* – Captain J. C. Dunn, medical officer of the Second Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, in which both Graves and Sassoon served, included several mentions of Robert Graves as a young officer. One relates to the autumn of 1915 when the battalion was serving in the now post-industrial area of northern France near the La Bassée canal: the area was vividly described by Edmund Blunden in *Undertones of War*. The settings can still be identified with a trench map and a little care. The record in Dunn's book refers to an incident in November 1915:

A 5.9 blew in C and D Companies Mess in the brewery at Pont Fixe during lunch. A slightly wounded Mess-servant was my first Battalion casualty as their M[edical].O[fficer]. The members of the Mess remember the affair best because of the grab one newcomer made at a milk-pudding and sped with it at a hitherto unsuspected pace, to a place of temporary safety a good way along Harley Street. This day and the next, five hundred 5.9s were dropped about Pont

Fixe, mostly on the brewery. [...] A Company H.Q. was the cellar of a house near Braddel Point. Among the occupants were two much-made-of kittens, and Graves. Graves had reputedly the largest feet in the Army, and a genius for putting both of them in everything. He put one on a kitten: it was enough. Not long afterwards [he was] transferred to the 1st Battalion.<sup>12</sup>

Sassoon included a description of Graves, under the name of David Cromlech, in his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* – speaking of him first as ‘an ideal companion’:

But no one was worse than he was at hitting it off with officers who distrusted cleverness and disliked unreserved utterances. In fact he was a positive expert at putting people’s backs up unintentionally. He was with our Second Battalion for a few months before they transferred him to ‘the First’, and during that period the Colonel was heard to remark that young Cromlech threw his tongue a hell of a lot too much, and that it was about time he gave up reading Shakespeare and took to using soap and water. [...] David certainly was deplorably untidy [...] he wasn’t good at being ‘seen but not heard’. ‘Far too fond of butting in with his opinion before he’s been asked for it,’ was often his only reward for an intelligent suggestion.<sup>13</sup>

It was Wilfred Owen who acknowledged that it was easier not to be burdened with imagination or, by implication, the power to express direct experience:

Happy are these who lose imagination:  
They have enough to carry with ammunition.  
Their spirit drags no pack.  
Their old wounds, save with cold, can not more ache.  
Having seen all things red,

Their eyes are rid  
    Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever.<sup>14</sup>

This relates to real people in real circumstances, a contrast to the Trojan-war-epic references that can be found in many writers, including on occasion Owen and Sassoon, both of whom were concerned to report truthfully. When Graves and Sassoon first met, Graves looked at some lines in an early wartime poem by Sassoon – ‘Return to greet me, colours that were my joy / Not in the woeful crimson of men slain’ and told him ‘in my old-soldier manner, that he would soon change his style’.<sup>15</sup> In turn, it was Sassoon who urged Owen to ‘Sweat your guts out writing poetry’<sup>16</sup> – to write about what he knew – and both stated their personal determination, while in England recovering from physical or psychological wounding, to return to France and do what they saw as their real job – not just to be ‘good officers’ in the prosecution of the war but to be with their men and do their best for them, to speak for the politically inarticulate; as Owen stated, to help them ‘directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can’.<sup>17</sup>

And many survivors of war, of all wars, have spoken of the intimate collusion between those who were ‘there’ and who recognise secret knowledge in each other that cannot ever be shared with ‘outsiders’, no matter how concerned or eager their innocent interlocutors. That brings us back to our choice of poet-witness – we pick on the one whose words seem most honest to us, or whose character we feel drawn to, the person best able to present the inaccessible in a way and at a level that we find accessible.

The intricate process of men with unspeakable experiences learning how to confront them and write them down – speaking the unspeakable, somehow – shows us how they dealt with memories that they could barely acknowledge.

Take the assault on Mametz Wood, for instance, in which the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Graves's regiment, was heavily involved: their remarkable series of published accounts come usefully to hand to fill in the gaps in our understanding – and, over some years of visiting the area, I have become fascinated by the way in which these personal accounts combine with the modern scene, fortunately still rural and accessible, to get nearer to the unapproachable moments of a long-past war.

There is Frank Richards, straightforward and unassuming in *Old Soldiers Never Die*:

...early in the morning of the 15th July passed through Fricourt and arrived at the end of Mametz Wood [...]. The enemy had been sending over tear-gas and the valley was thick with it. [...] We rested in shell holes, the ground all around us being thick with dead of the troops who had been attacking Mametz Wood. [...] I would try and get a couple of German topcoats and some food if I could find any. The topcoats would be very handy as we were in fighting order, and the nights were cold for July. Just inside the wood, which was a great tangle of broken trees and branches, was a German trench and all around our dead and theirs were laying. I was in luck's way: I got two tins of stew and half a loaf of bread, also two topcoats.<sup>18</sup>

Graves was there too, and wrote in *Good-bye to All That* more than a decade later:

For the next two days we were in bivouacs outside the wood. We were in fighting kit and the nights were wet and cold. I went into the wood to find German overcoats to use as blankets. Mametz Wood was full of dead of the Prussian Guards Reserve, big men, and of Royal Welch and South Wales Borderers of the new-army battalions, little men. There was not a single tree in the wood unbroken. I got my

greatcoats and came away as quickly as I could, climbing over the wreckage of green branches. Going and coming, by the only possible route, I had to pass by the corpse of a German with his back propped against a tree. He had a green face, spectacles, close shaven hair; black blood was dripping from the nose and beard. He had been there for some days and was bloated and stinking.<sup>19</sup>

And at the time ...

### A Dead Boche

To you who'd read my songs of War  
And only hear of blood and fame,  
I'll say (you've heard it said before)  
'War's Hell!' and if you doubt the same,  
To-day I found in Mametz Wood  
A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,  
In a great mess of things unclean,  
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk  
With clothes and face a sodden green,  
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,  
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.<sup>20</sup>

Not one of his most subtle poems: but these were not subtle conditions. This is an episode lived through by a young man, still only twenty, as he walked and scrambled through the wood, continually in danger, and then recollected, perhaps dispelling the strength of the memory by writing it in terms more forceful and aggressive than those of many of his other 'war' poems – and here we have corroborative evidence in Frank Richards's book.

And Graves was, in a way, a witness to his own death, which became another ironic episode for him in the absurdity of war: he

described being hit, and lying unconscious for more than twenty-four hours. On 22 July the colonel wrote to his mother, saying that Robert had died of wounds; meanwhile, he had come round while on a hospital train to Rouen. He wrote home, and his letter arrived on 24 July, his twenty-first birthday: later that day the colonel's letter arrived, saying that he was dead – and another, from the hospital in Rouen, saying that he was in a very serious condition; and yet another from Robert himself, that he was comfortable and improving. At the end of the week his parents received a letter from his batman – saying that he was dead and his belongings were being sent home: but also another from Robert, followed by a wire saying he would soon be coming home.

This sequence of events, in its combination of crossed wires and capacity to cause immense grief, is immediately recognisable as part of a real world: this is how things happen when the individual is caught up in a crisis structure necessarily designed to operate on a huge scale in almost impossible circumstances. Graves is a particularly suitable victim for these absurd circumstances – who could have bettered his appreciation of the absurdity of this brief sequence ?

One of the most interesting 'eye-witness' reports on being in the war comes from another member of the same regiment, the Royal Welch Fusiliers – David Jones, with *In Parenthesis*. And here we have the paradox of Jones writing in the most immediately expressive way he could achieve, to present specific incidents in a moment-by-moment actuality – writing not as a diary or record of the past, but seeking an almost visual immediacy. In later times it could almost be regarded as a televisual film story-line despite being expressed in an intricate tissue of myth, Welsh tradition, soldiers' humour and religious imagery. Its development took a full two decades, and two nervous breakdowns, before it was ready for release to the outside world. In the end, Jones is a twenty-years-older man bearing witness to his young self in the heart of battle – and we, now nearly one hundred years after the

event, with some eight decades and another world war between publication and our present-day reading, can still use this carefully worked directness to bring us closer to the past. Any battlefield visit to the Somme should take *In Parenthesis* and perhaps read from it in the appropriate setting – Part 7 is his description of attacking through that same tangle of Mametz Wood, the trees brought down by shelling, the monstrous impossibility of fighting effectively through the brushwood, tree roots, brambles and shell-holes with all sense of order and direction lost. Jones's mystic and religious sensibilities add a further layer of impression to Graves's record of his personal memory of the wood.

In his work on *Good-bye to All That*, Richard Perceval Graves remarks on his uncle's belief,

declared long before *Good-bye to All That* came to be written, that literal truth is relatively unimportant, as an artist can tell the truth by a condensation and dramatisation of the facts<sup>21</sup>

and makes his own comment that the book is a record of what it was like to be a British soldier during the First World War. Graves, in fact, is our eye-witness reporter.

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- <sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, 'The Last Post', *Goliath and David* (1916), repr. in *Poems About War*, ed. by William Graves (London: Cassell, 1988), p. 29.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward Thomas, letter quoted in *A Deep Cry: A Literary Pilgrimage to the Battlefields and Cemeteries of First World War British Soldier Poets Killed in Northern France and Flanders*, ed. by Anne Powell (Aberporth: Palladur, 1993), p. 213.
- <sup>3</sup> Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1991), p. 26.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Poetry of Edward Thomas*, p. 138.
- <sup>5</sup> Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1928), p. 281.
- <sup>6</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), letter 482, p. 430.
- <sup>7</sup> *Collected Letters*, letter 481, p. 428.
- <sup>8</sup> Edmund Blunden, 'To W.O. and his Kind', *On Several Occasions*, (London: Corvinus, 1939), repr. in *Overtones of War: Poems of the First World War*, ed. by Martin Taylor (London: Duckworth, 1956), p. 187.
- <sup>9</sup> Edmund Blunden, '1916 seen from 1921', *ibid.*, p. 77.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Graves, *But It Still Goes On* (London: Cape, 1930), pp. 41–42.
- <sup>11</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 16.
- <sup>12</sup> J. C. Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew 1914–1919* (London: King, 1938; repr. London: Abacus, 1994), p. 165.
- <sup>13</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Folio Society, 1974 (1930)), p. 82.
- <sup>14</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Insensibility', *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. by Jon Stallworthy (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 122.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That*, ed. by Richard Perceval Graves (Oxford, Berghahn, 1995), p. 160.
- <sup>16</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, letter 541, p. 456.
- <sup>17</sup> *Collected Letters*, letter 662, p. 580.
- <sup>18</sup> Frank Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (London: Faber, 1933; repr. Peterborough: Krijnen & Langley, 2004), p. 130.
- <sup>19</sup> *Good-bye to All That*, p. 189.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert Graves, 'A Dead Boche', *Goliath and David* (1916), repr. in *Poems About War*, p. 30.
- <sup>21</sup> *Good-bye to All That*, p. xiii.