

Robert Graves's Enduring War

Frank Kersnowski

Nicholas D. Kristof in 2007 concluded his *New York Times* column 'The Poets of War' about poems from the Iraq war with a general observation:

Throughout history, the most memorable accounts of war – from Homer to Wilfred Owen – haven't been journalistic or historical, but poetic. For whatever reason, the ugliest of human pursuits generates some of the most beautiful human handiwork.

So let's add these poems, as one more monument to the folly of this war – and one more memorial to those who will never rejoin their families.¹

We may not agree that the poems of war Mr Kristof cites, 'from Homer to Owen', are 'beautiful', but surely he is movingly accurate in claiming precedent value in the poetry of war. The pity and irony in Owen's 'Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead' come to mind, as do the bitterly satiric poems of Sassoon and Graves's poems about comradeship and the futility of war. Not only did these poets make sensible the loss and pain of those who fought, they extended their concern to what they saw as more than 'folly': a cynical pursuit of war for profit. As late as his children's story *An Ancient Castle*, Graves castigated war profiteers in the character of a rich man who sold bad jam to the army in the First World War. An example from the time of war is Siegfried Sassoon's now famous letter of condemnation that could have led to a court martial if Graves had not intervened.

Graves has no poems of war as memorable as the best of either Sassoon's or Owen's. The reason is clear: though Graves wrote about the war, he was never a war poet in the strict sense of the

term. He was not made a poet by the war as he observed some were. Yet his life as a poet is a testament to the enduring effect of war not only on his life but on the lives of all those who found themselves in the midst of war.

After dismissing the juvenilia, we find the poems in Graves's early volumes to be predictably concerned with the war. Comradeship and pride in the regiment share his attention with a repugnance for the violence and for what he came to regard as the waste of lives. Many quite topical poems from *Over the Brazier*, *Goliath and David* and *Fairies and Fusiliers* were not included in *Poems (1914-26)*. But very telling is the omission of 'Nursery Memories' (originally published in *Over the Brazier*). The three poems in this sequence Graves wrote in a copy of the Everyman edition of Keats given to him by his father. He wrote them when he was deployed (as we call being sent to battle) and did not revise them, so they are very revealing of his state of mind and of his understanding of war, as can be illustrated by any one of them. 'The First Funeral' begins with a historical and biographical placing: '(The first corpse I saw was on the / German wires, and couldn't be buried)'. Instead of writing about this death, he recalls when he and his sister found a dead dog and buried it, 'And said: "Poor dog, Amen!"'. The use of analogy was important for Graves not only in this poem but in many early ones as a way of expressing (perhaps understanding) the way the fabric of his being was changed by war. The past became iconic but within the reality of his present life as a soldier at war defining the values: unpredictable and uncontrollable violence that destroyed reason and independence. Especially when he became an advocate of depth psychology with its inquiries into the unconscious, he used analogy.

By the mid-twenties, specifically by 1924, Graves had rejected depth psychology as a way to understand his irrational experience and analogy as a means of expression. Instead, he wrote the history, or the 'one story' of his spiritual journey. In the original version of 'The Pier-Glass', a homicidal succubus tells of her

abused life, her death, and eternal revenge, ending with:

Did not my answer please the Master's ear?
 Yet, I'll stay obstinate. How went the question,
 A paltry question set on the elements
 Of love and the wronged lover's obligation?
Kill or forgive? Still does the bed ooze blood?
 Let it drip down till every floor-plank rot!
 Yet shall I answer, challenging the judgement: –
 '*Kill, strike the blow again, spite what shall come.*'
 'Kill, strike, again, again,' the bees in chorus hum.²

Though reprinted complete in *Poems (1914-26)*, Graves eliminated the last section in all future printings. Perhaps he wanted to present only the terrifying muse without evoking thought of analogy or of his war-neurosis, which was often imaged as sound such as the hum of bees. I am, however, inclined to think that he wanted to lessen the visceral impact of the poem, not remove the trappings of an earlier poetic technique. He would do the same when he revised 'In Dedication', the poem which introduces *The White Goddess*. As with the 'kisses four' in Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', the specificity of detail does not function as symbol or analogy, but seems a code for actual experience.

He would admit as much in 'A History', which he published in 1924; it deserves to be read complete here, since it was only reprinted once, in Volume 3 of the *Complete Poems*, edited by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward:³

The Palmist said: 'In your left hand, which shews your inheritance,
 the Line of Head dips steeply towards Luna. In your right hand, which
 shews your development, there is a determined effort to escape into less

melancholy thinking.' I said nothing, but shewed him this sonnet: –

When in my first and loneliest love I saw
 The sun swim down in tears to meet the sea,
 When woods and clouds and mountains massed their awe
 To whelm the house of torment that was me,
 When spirits below the cromlech heard me pass,
 Belling their hate with such malignant cries
 That horror and anguish rustled through the grass
 And the very flowers glared up with oafish eyes,

Then round I turned where rose the death-white Fay
 And knew her well that exercised her wand,
 That spurred my heart with rowellings day by day
 To the very reach of madness, and beyond,
 Thee, Moon, whom now I flout, by thought made bold,
 Naked, my Joseph's garment in thy hold.

The poems of war, marriage, and children that figured largely in *Poems (1914-26)* were omitted from the *Collected Poems* of 1938. Graves did, though, quote liberally from the war poems in his Foreword to the volume. He paid particular attention to the poems he wrote for Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Nichols, fellow poets and line officers. The poem 'The Gnat' is omitted and deservedly so: a poem of limited poetic value, being a forced and fantastic narrative of possession. The narrative tells of an old shepherd with an iron-clawed insect burrowing into his brain. Driven to distraction, he destroys all – even his beloved dog Prinky – yet holds to the trauma. This is the manifest meaning of the poem, but when Graves wrote the poem, he was still an advocate of depth psychology; the hidden meaning of the poem is Graves's reluctance to free himself of his war neurosis lest he cease to be a poet. In this reliance on trauma, he far predates the Confessional Poets of the fifties. If he had continued to rely so strongly and

passionately on his neurosis that was the result of war, he might have been a suicide, as were later poets such as Sexton and Plath.

Much like them, Graves clung to neurosis, but not as a muse. As Graves mentioned, his muse always had physical form: the war itself, and later his wife, Nancy. He did, however, define both by his own needs. Of the war, Siegfried Sassoon observed that Robert always had a nose for whatever was nasty. To an extent, he was right; but he missed both the source and the reason for what Graves saw as 'nasty'. Possibly Sassoon could not have known of the utter disruption of Graves's reality brought on by the war and Graves's wounding. Graves did not have the hunting and golf and well-tailored clothes that were the talismen of Sassoon, such signs of a stable life that even war did not destroy, if we are to believe his autobiographical novels about George Sherston. Graves entered married life with none of the Victorian moorings in place. He was not established in a career; his wife was unwilling to accept the expected social role; though they did not live in penury, they had little. These were predictable results of the great shift in life and meaning brought on by World War I.

And some of Graves's most moving poems about his wife that had been included in *Poems (1914-26)* were omitted in *Collected Poems (1938)*. One omitted poem, especially, indicates Graves's new consideration of himself as poet: 'A Valentine'.⁴ Published in *Whipperginny (1923)*, 'A Valentine' forcefully presents Graves's granting to his wife the role of power over his life and death, much as he had been forced to accept such power as existing outside his personal control during the war:

The hunter to the husbandman
Pays tribute since our love began,
And to love-loyalty dedicates
The phantom hunts he meditates.
Let me pursue, pursuing you,
Beauty of other shape and hue,
Retreating graces of which none

Shone more than candle to your sun,
Your well-loved shadow beckoning me
In unfamiliar imagery –
Smile your forgiveness; each bright ghost
Dives in love's glory and is lost,
Yielding your comprehensive pride
A homage, even to suicide.

Though a more grisly Valentine may have been written, I have not read it. Graves's celebration in 'A Valentine' is of the unfamiliar being who can neither be simply poetic inspiration, nor simply his familiar wife. That he might well have become aware of the spirit through his love of his wife is possible. More than likely he had, as Catherine Dalton wrote to me, spiritually experienced the Goddess. That he could have done so without the presence of Nancy Nicholson (or a woman able to play the same role) is unlikely. In healing him by substituting a domineering love for his fear of helplessness in battle, she opened the door into a spiritual reality that would obsess, give meaning to his life. Few women who have bound themselves to men mutilated (in body and psyche) have been able to play such a role. Though other such unions must exist, I've only known wounded soldiers who were married to their nurses for a brief time until the night sweats and nightmares became unbearable. One man, who disappeared some years ago, always comes to mind.

Gene married his nurse and began to relieve his traumas after he wrote and read a piece about his being wounded. His wife told me he woke up screaming 'Medic! I'm hit!' less often after he wrote the piece, but the marriage ended. And he deteriorated in every way. For some years, he would call periodically or leave a message from 'the cripple', as he came to call himself after he was confined to a wheelchair while he sat and drank looking out into the Gulf of Mexico. The differences between Gene and Robert Graves can be easily summed up: one was a genius. But even without that obvious distinction, Robert did what Gene could not:

he made his debility into a strength. Not being able to free himself of the effects of his 'war-neurosis', Graves deified them. Of course, he had precedent in gods whose realities and reasons could not be understood by mortals, but he also had his own spiritual life and the endurance of the Victorian world.

Nancy Nicholson seemed odd to many, yet she was good mother, according to her daughter Catherine; and she stayed with Robert through thin and thinner. Though she seemed unconventional in socialist-leaning politics and foods that would now be seen as part of the wave of the organic, she stayed married to a man who would wake up screaming; and he stayed married to a woman who made apparently irrational demands and seemed to lack social awareness. She would not, for instance, go to Garsington, the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell, the social lioness known for introducing discord in marriages; and she would not countenance the war talk of Graves's army friends such as Sassoon. In both instances, she protected both her marriage and her husband. Since she destroyed letters and manuscripts relating to her marriage, we must remember that most of what we know about her is from Graves's memoir *Good-bye to All That*, in which the hand of Laura Riding is most present. Riding had several reasons to dislike Graves's wife. Perhaps the marriage ended when they ceased to be dependent on one another or became consciously 'modern'.

Whatever the cause, the nature of Graves's Muse changed, as he made evident in 'To the Sovereign Muse', which I need to quote in full:⁵

He, he and I in our time reckoned that
Between us we knew all the poets
Who erstwhile bore the name: none bore it clear,
Not one. Some we commended
For being all they might be in a day
To which poetry was a shrouded emblem,
And some we frowned of for lawyers' clerks
Drafting conveyances on moral sheepskin,

Or for pantomimists making parody
Of a magnificence not yet enjoyed.

This was to praise ourselves, rebuke ourselves
How we sufficed, fell short, exceeded
In days before you came, you first,
Who plucked the speech-thread from a jargon-tangled
Fleece of a thousand tongues, wills, voices,
To be a single speech, twisted fine;
Snapping it short like Fate then –
‘Thus much, no more –’

And we confessed that since you came
We might no longer feign and stutter
As poets of the passionate chance,
Nor claim the indulgence of the hour.
Our tongues must prompter be than those
That wag with modish lamentation –
Or lost men, otherwise, and renegades
To our confession, maudlin-sane must die
Suicides on the stair of yesterday.

This poem answers several questions, such as who removed the last section of ‘The Pier-Glass’ and why Graves at this time struggled against the visceral and passionate in his poetry. *Collected Poems* (1938) is arranged into five sections, or ‘stages’ as Graves calls them in the Foreword. His description of the last three I quote in full:

In the third stage the poetic self has become the critic of the divided human self. Poetry is not a mere mitigation of haunting experiences: it is an exorcism of physical pretensions by self-humbling honesties.

In the fourth stage the criticism is turned outwards upon a world in gloom: poetry is seen not only as a saving personal

solution but as a general source of light.

In the fifth stage comes a more immediate sense of poetic liberation – achieved not by mysticism but by practical persistence.⁶

Graves, without doubt, gained strength and understanding as a poet from the rigorous dissection of himself as poet, but such an Aristotelian, i.e., rational, winnowing of his poetry is contrary to his central poetic insight and truth. Such a sifting out of life every ten years or so serves a real purpose for anyone, allowing (or necessitating) an inventory of who we are and where we are going. Graves was fortunate that he gained a sharper critical eye for his own poetry as he denigrated his earlier mysticism and rejected poetry as a ‘mitigation of haunting experiences’. So for a while the murderous Livia replaced the ‘death-white Fay’, and Graves aspired to live as a writer in a secular rather than spiritual world. The inspiration was near at hand: Laura Riding. He would soon be ready, as he chronicled some years later in *Seven Days in New Crete*, to wash that woman right out of his hair.

When ten years later Graves again published a *Collected Poems*, he retained most of the poems from the 1938 edition and wrote a much shorter Foreword, one lacking the sense that he was making an inventory:

In Egypt in 1926 I collected all the poems I had published during the previous twelve years, discarded most of them, revised and republished the remainder. Twelve years later with the help of Laura Riding – we had long been in close literary partnership – I made a second revision, and a revision of all the poems that I had written meanwhile. Having by then a clearer notion of the poetic course that I was steering I could discard more generously than before, so that the new book was shorter by forty pages. [...]

Now to make further improvements: the removal of another twenty poems, the revision of several more, the

restoration of four early ones from the 1926 edition, and this shortened foreword.⁷

What Graves does not mention is the return of a poetry of mysticism, awe, and (yes) the danger that was an indelible dye earlier in his poetry. The first four sections of the volume he accurately summed up in his Foreword but not the new poems in sections six and seven. Here there is the shared presence of love, war, and the divine that had not been characteristic of the new poems in *Collected Poems* (1938).

As Graves's fellow poets and his schoolmates knew, his literary life changed forever in 1944: he suddenly stopped marking a map for *The Golden Fleece* and over the next three weeks wrote 70,000 words concerning the riddles of the *Song of Taliesin*. This became his book *The White Goddess*. His telling of his inspired writing on a subject unfamiliar to him is often repeated, generally without comment. Striking as is the writing, just as much so is his return to a reliance on the non-rational (or shall we call it the mystical?) as his guide. The poems he wrote during this time are, again, passionate love poems which share space with poems of war, and in both, as it had been, the two are linked in the poet's belief that he cannot control his fate.

The poems in section six of *Collected Poems (1914–1947)* are of awakening, birth, and return. Of awakening, there is the tender love poem, written without doubt to Beryl, whom he had been with in fact since the break-up with Laura Riding and in spirit longer than that, 'She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep' (p. 196):

She tells her love while half asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low:
As Earth stirs in her winter sleep
And puts out grass and flowers
Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow.

Though not the most remarkable poem in this collection, ‘She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep’ repeats his early love poems, though now without the trauma, but with the former assurance that he and love will survive the winter and the famine to celebrate spring again. This theme is so important to him that he tells it more than once, always with the same trust in love but with a slightly different import, as in the very memorable poem ‘Mid-Winter Waking’ (p. 187):

Stirring suddenly from long hibernation
I knew myself once more a poet
Guarded by timeless principalities
Against the worm of death, this hillside haunting;
And presently dared open both my eyes.

O gracious, lofty, shone against from under,
Back-of-the-mind-far clouds like towers;
And you, sudden warm airs that blow
Before the expected season of new blossom,
While sheep till gnaw at roots and lambless go –

Be witness that on waking, this mid-winter,
I found her hand in mine laid closely
Who shall watch out the Spring with me.
We stared in silence all around us
But found no winter anywhere to see.

Clearly winter is a spiritual and poetic condition as well as a strictly seasonal one, but as if to remind himself that the awakening, or rebirth, resonates in his physical life, he wrote a poem to celebrate the birth of the one daughter among the four children Beryl bore. ‘To Lucia at Birth’ (p. 194) is not unusual in its feelings, nor should it be. The birth of a daughter commemorates a hope of continued creation that poetry itself reflects. And in Graves’s poem, as in Yeats’s ‘A Prayer for My

Daughter', the father cannot rid himself of a perhaps unnecessary concern and protectiveness:

Though the moon beaming matronly and bland
Greet you, among the crowd of the new-born,
With 'welcome to the world' yet understand
That still her pale, lascivious unicorn
And bloody lion are loose on either hand:
With din of bones and tantarará of horn
Their fanciful cortège parades the land –
Pest on the high road, wild-fire in the corn.

Outrageous company to be born into,
Lunatics of a royal age long dead.
Then reckon time by what you are or do,
Not by the epochs of the war they spread.
Hark how they roar; but never turn your head.
Nothing will change them, let them not change you.

This poem read alone and out of context is a wonderful articulation of what a father feels and thinks when his child is born during the uncertainty of war. The joy commingled with worry and anger was mine when my daughter was born while newspapers daily showed flag-draped coffins coming to the United States from Vietnam, and later I found a reprise of that time with the birth of my granddaughter, even though the coffins were kept from public view as if to deny the ultimate loss of the men and women killed in Iraq – or living after being wounded, as Robert Graves did after World War I.

But read within the context of this section of *Collected Poems* (1948), 'To Lucia at Birth' is one of the touchstones to understanding both the achievement of Graves as a poet and his survival as a man. The use of analogy integral to his early poems about the war is long gone, dropped as his understanding of himself as poet developed, but that practice illustrates the nature

of Graves's understanding of war. The essential fabric of his identity was changed: his understanding of his past, his present, and his future. He lost belief in a self-determined life: it changed to belief in one that is determined by unpredictable and uncontrollable violence predicated by a force he could neither influence nor avoid. His being was changed physically and psychically forever, as have been the fate and lives of many since. The sergeant from the Royal Welch Fusiliers who played the bugle over Robert's grave in Deyá at the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme said to me that he regretted Mr. Graves had not come to visit the regiment. 'He would have been honoured.' Doubtless. Especially if they had seen the remarkable personal achievement of a man who could have been a physical and emotional cripple after his war.

Graves returned to the theme of war in the midst of a very happy time with Beryl and their children most likely for two reasons: his reawakening to the presence of the Goddess, and the fact of World War II. The latter is evident through the death of his son David in 1943, and the marriage of his daughter Jenny. Of her wedding Graves wrote 'At the Savoy Chapel' (pp. 202–03). His daughter 'Flight Officer Jenny Nicholson' married 'Alexander Clifford, the war correspondent' on 22 February 1945; 'They met in the front line'. After a sardonic look at those assembled for the wedding, the father of the bride observed:

Now for you, loving ones, who kneel at the altar
And preside afterwards at table –
The trophy sword that shears the cake recalling

What god you entertained last year together,
His bull neck looped with guts,
Trampling corpse-carpet through the villages –

Here is my private blessing: so to remain
As today you are, with features

Resolute and unchangeably your own.

Again, he unites the passion of union and the violence of war.

Even though Robert Graves had been turned down when he tried to enlist, because of his age, the war was personal to him: complex and paradoxical. Pride in his regiment and loyalty to his comrades, though not to the causes of war, remained indelible in his being. Understandably at this time, he would write of his own war, as in 'The Last Day of Leave (1916)' (pp. 204–05), which recalls when he and four friends had a lunch in a peaceful countryside. Later, they would recall the day as one of carefree pleasures, small and telling, of coffee brewed outdoors and cold chicken, talks of loves and times to be. The contrast between the friendship of the comrades and what losing each other cost them is palpable in the last stanza:

'Do you remember the lily lake?
We were all there, all five of us in love,
No one yet killed, widowed or broken-hearted.'

In 'The Oldest Soldier' (pp. 213–14), Graves writes of lives discarded after war, of men who served with honour and bravery, with devotion to regiment and country, yet neither found, nor perhaps deserved, a place of honour in peacetime:

Twenty-one years, and out Harry came
To be odd-job man, or janitor,
Or commissionaire at a picture-house,
Or, some say, bully to a whore.

But his King and Country calling Harry,
He reported again at the Dépôt,
To perch on this railing like a starling,
The oldest soldier of the row.

That poems of love, beginnings, reawakenings should appear at

the same time as and together with poems of war is not simply a matter of a whimsical gathering of material by Graves. Nor did he happen to write such poems during the same period by accident. These poems have an integral relationship with each other in Graves's being, one established long ago. Clearly, this and the other *Collected Poems* were arranged with care to show these links. Without seeing how many complexities can sit on the head of a pin, I'll simply say that Beryl was Graves's muse at the time he compiled the *Collected Poems* of 1948 and that she caused the great poems in the last section, 'Magical Poems', to come into being.

Graves once said that he could only write when the muse was physically present. As Beryl's objection to my repeating this statement indicates, the presence of the muse is not a simple matter to establish. But let us say that Graves did not create out of whole cloth, that his most inspired writing occurred in response to actual experiences, and I prefer not to define either 'actual' or 'experiences'. Instead, I will repeat what Beryl told me about the Glass Castle in *The White Goddess*: When they were in Switzerland, Robert was bitten on the heel by a viper and saw the Glass Castle. My place is not to deny or affirm the likelihood of this event or of the appearance of the 'death-white Fay' in the poem 'A History'. His experience in 1924 was real to him, so real he rejected the psychological bases for his intimations of a goddess and saw her as a real being, whose history he would tell. In 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' (pp. 220–21), in the last section, he said: 'There is one story and one story only / That will prove worth your telling'. The story is of the divinity he now called the White Goddess, who, though dominant in all ways over all creatures, made no empty promises:

Her brow was creamy as the crested wave,
Her sea-blue eyes were wild
But nothing promised that is not performed.
That she promised death as well as life, without explaining or

justifying her acts is not for the poet or anyone else to question, as he made clear in the last poem of *Collected Poems* (1948), 'Return of the Goddess' (p. 240):

At dawn you shall appear,
A gaunt red-leggèd crane,
You whom they know too well for fear,
Lunging your beak down like a spear
To fetch them home again.

After a Latin 'charm' are the words 'THE END'. The book has come to its end and Graves has set his course. Note he writes of the *return* of the Goddess. She had been with him before, just absent from his life for some time. He would see that she returned when she chose without his bidding. But I think she came when his life and talent were receptive and had been present, just not palpable to him, for a long time.

Part, a large part I think, of what great art does is to make the miraculous (even the horrible) that one person has seen comprehensible to many. However, no matter how well Graves wrote, we can never have the same experience he did. We must remember that experiencing grief and reading an elegy are very different experiences. We do have ways to understand, perhaps even empathetically, however. Probably most of us have had experience with violence and the following trauma, an automobile accident perhaps or a burglary that stayed with us like a bruise. I still experience the beginning of World War II and the war itself. My father was stationed on Oahu on 7 December 1941. When he had reported to the hospital where he served, my mother and I stood in the back yard and watched Japanese planes fly over on their runs to Pearl and Hickam. The planes were low enough for us to see the faces of the pilots. Decades went by before I stopped ducking when a single engine plane flew overhead; and I still smell the talcum-dusted rubber of the gas mask I had to have with me, remember the siren for a submarine alert on the transport back

to the States. I remember the wounded in the stateside hospitals where my father served and the stories they told. I remember the badly wounded Nisei in the 100th Battalion of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a Nisei unit that served with great distinction in the war in Europe. And as I think of the White Goddess who made no promises she did not keep, I recall one of the old Irish triads:

Three things to be wary of:
The hoof of a horse
The tooth of a hound
The smile of a Saxon.

I would change the last line to read: ‘Promises of politicians who want a war.’ But these coincidences have merely personal relevance. Graves’s experiences were the materials of life transmuted by genius into art. And that has made all the difference.

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NOTES

¹ Nicholas J. Kristof, ‘The Poets of War’, *New York Times* (11 June 2007), p. A23.

² Robert Graves, *Poems (1914-26)* (London: Heinemann, 1927), pp. 72–73.

³ *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, vol. 3 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), pp. 330–31.

⁴ *Poems (1914-26)*, p. 111.

⁵ *Collected Poems* (London: Cassell, 1938), p. 180.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. xi–xii.