A Matter of Interpretation

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The recent Jewish Museum (Manhattan) exhibition 'The Sassoons', included Robert Graves's verse letter to Siegfried Sassoon entitled 'To S. S.'[1] The curators made an interesting observation pertaining to the following lines (original capitalization and punctuation preserved): [2]

> And I'll be happier than the Pope
> For Peter will be there I hope
> (This Peter still may win a part
> Of David's corner in your heart
> I hope so.) And one day we three
> Shall sail together on the sea
> For adventure and quest and fight –
> And God! What Poetry we'll write.

They interpreted the parenthetical ('This [...] so.) to be 'overtly expressing [Graves's] wish that Siegfried would convert to Christianity'. When I posted this note accompanying a photograph of the letter to a public discussion list, it elicited the reasonable response that there is no record of Graves attempting to convert Sassoon and that scholars have interpreted the lines to mean only one thing: Graves is asking Sassoon to befriend Peter Johnstone, Graves's younger Charterhouse friend and subject of the poem '1915'[3] with the same affection he felt for David Thomas, a friend and fellow soldier, recently killed in action.[4] In all honesty, I had noticed the familiar names but failed to consider that Graves had intended that meaning. For one thing, it seemed insensitive to David Thomas's memory and to Sassoon's feelings for him. And the jocular reference to 'the Pope' immediately preceding influenced me toward the

curators' conversion interpretation. Although he never mentions he 'wished' Sassoon would convert in *Good-Bye to All That* or afterward, nor do any of his biographers mention it, I readily accepted that Graves may have harboured such a wish, because that seemed a reasonable interpretation of the lines and the characteristic wordplay/nameplay seemed compatible.

The idiom 'happier than the Pope' originates in the French expression, *Heureux comme un pape,* literally 'Happy as a Pope.' I don't know if the expression was current in Northern France or among the British troops, in the original French or English translation, or whether Graves and Sassoon were both familiar with it. Perhaps the line referenced a discussion they'd had or a shared experience. At the very least, writing it into the poem, Graves would seem to be stepping outside classic poetic conventions (displaying his intent to write poems such as 'In Spite' rather than 'In Limbo'), and perhaps urging by example Sassoon to do likewise.

The reference to "The Pope" resonates within the lines, 'This Peter may still win a part | Of David's corner in your heart'. I have been persuaded that 'This Peter' is Peter Johnstone (and [this] David, David Thomas), but the implied *that* Peter, is St Peter, the first Pope. Graves economically introduces the second reading of these lines (the deprecated conversion reading) just as he introduces the first.

In the manuscript, "This" is written in darker ink, perhaps covering over another word, and perhaps reasserting the double meaning. 'This' is reminiscent of Yeats's 'that' in the first line of 'Sailing to Byzantium'. 'That is no country for old men' invites us to ask, what country is Yeats now inhabiting? What is not 'that' but 'this' country and how is it different from 'that'?

One may argue that the curators have overread the reference, and Graves isn't expressing a full-blown wish that Sassoon convert *per se*, because conversion implies a more

serious level of recommitment than the rhymed lines allow. And lacking additional documentation, that Graves wished Sassoon to convert can't be asserted. The seriousness of Graves's interest in Sassoon's faith is hard to determine. But, having introduced the Pope, and specifically evoked St Peter by interjecting the otherwise superfluous demonstrative pronoun, it's easier to believe that Graves had something like the conversion meaning in mind than that he was oblivious to the implication of the names, particularly since the Sassoons claimed to be of the Davidic line.

How else might one interpret Graves's intent? Could he be asking Sassoon just to appreciate his clever name play? He certainly is doing that, but surely that depends on Sassoon seeing the double meaning. While the poem is joyful and high-spirited, death was everywhere (referencing David Thomas reinforces that point); at every hand they were reminded of their own mortality. If Graves still embraced the Christian faith, what could be more reasonable than inviting Sassoon to consider faith and the consolation it might provide at this sad, stressful time?[5] In the presence of a more profound, spiritual request, the mundane, personal request that Sassoon embrace Peter Johnstone takes on a new poignancy. 'In light of David's death, and the likelihood of ours, and in light of this affinity between the personal and the mythic, won't you open your heart to someone else I love?'

The typescript poem ends with Graves evoking a kind of childlike 'Owl and the Pussycat' imagery, with the three of them – Sassoon, Peter Johnstone, and Graves – 'sailing together on the sea'.[6] And like Lear's companions who sail for the sheer joy of it, to 'dance by the light of the moon', the purpose Graves envisions for his company cruise is 'adventure and quest and fight – | And God! What Poetry we'll write.'

Placing 'fight' in a triplet with 'adventure' and 'quest' Graves poeticizes battle with a naivete that the war poems in

Over the Brasier suggest he had already outgrown. Perhaps he is writing about fight ironically, with tongue in cheek. One might reasonably argue the exclamation 'And God!' is similarly ironic or merely a vernacular expression. (Perhaps in 500 years when some enterprising PhD. candidate translates Graves's poems into contemporary Amer-English, this exclamation will be rewritten as 'OMIGOD!') But there is also a layer of sobriety and sincerity here. If we heuristically erase the em dash, we extend the sequence 'For adventure and quest and fight [...] And God!' 'God!' thus does double duty, just as Peter and David do. The merry trio is sailing together for adventure, quest, fight, and God – a trope signifying unreasonable but unshakable faith that perhaps nobody needs to be reminded will recur in the opening lines of 'The White Goddess'. Even when we readmit the em dash, the emphasis capital for Poetry asks us to see God and Poetry as somehow conjoined, or to adopt a point of view in which Poetry and God (or faith), appear to be founded on a revelation of the Real, on what is enduring. I am suggesting that even if Graves's faith had been shaken, there is an ontological hunger that is finding expression in Christian tropes, and these continue to be of solace.

Yet, that may not be all these lines intend. 'At Carnoy', a poem Sassoon had recently written (dated July 3rd, 1916) concludes 'To take some cursed Wood.... O world God made!'[7] Graves surely knew this poem and may have meant his exclamation to correct Sassoon's mordant o altitudo. 'God is not to be abused for the troubles of the world; God is to be praised and (invoked) for the power resident in Poetry to make sense of and transcend those troubles'.

So, the modified 'conversion' reading that I am considering would be summarized as, 'Siegfried, please think about accepting Christianity or at least allowing Christianity a space beside your Jewish beliefs and identity and see how

God cannot be meaningfully separated from Poetry or our reverence for Poetry.'

Sassoon's 1917 poem, 'Attack' concludes with a quatrain that might refer back to these lines.

> They leave their trenches, going over the top,
> While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
> And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
> Flounders in mud. O Jesu, make it stop.[8]

Sassoon may be speaking in the voice of an anonymous soldier and the invocation may merely be a coincidental echo, but the ambiguity in this invocation, even pervaded with desperation, is notably different from the utter acidity of the earlier one. Perhaps Sassoon is still arguing with Graves – or the Graves of 1916.

Lastly, I would suggest the lines are ultimately about neither conversion nor friendship. Dunstan Ward insightful reference to Alexander Pope's epistolary verse sheds light here. 'Happier than the Pope' may be an implicit reference to Alexander Pope (though, I wish Graves had retained the original idiom, 'As happy as [A] Pope'). The literary allusion calls attention to Graves's poetic ingenuity in the immediately succeeding lines that will express two different meanings at once. I imagine him in nervous, high spirits, celebrating their friendship and their project to compose poems in concert, intwining them in epistolary form. Love, friendship, death, and God are magnified in importance in these lines, but it is Poetry that is the indispensable thing. 'And God! What poetry we'll write', completing the fourth couplet in this passage, is Janus-like in that it looks ahead at poems yet to be created, and at the poem just completed, particularly the preceding three couplets with their double and triple meanings: 'And God! What poetry we'll write' (like *this* poem!).

The final exclamation also issues what we might describe as a friendly challenge, poet to poet. 'Siegfried, I've just written a personal, impersonal, complicated, high-spirited, passionate, expressive, deeply faithful, honest, technically accomplished, tossed-off poem. Let's see what *you* can do.' As sincere as he is that Sassoon accept his friend and consider his consolation, Graves has joined these wishes together for the express purpose of demonstrating poetic economy, and his own extraordinary facility to communicate and express himself honestly, elegantly, originally, and boldly through poetry.

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NOTES

[1] First published as 'Letter to S. S. from Mametz Wood' in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917).
[2] Esther da Costa Meyer, a Princeton emerita, and Claudia Nahson, Morris and Eva Feld, Senior Curator are eminent scholars of art history and architecture.
[3] '1915' is a tender poem published in *Over the* Brasier. Graves subsequently omitted it from later collections.
[4] For more about David Thomas and his relationships with Graves and Sassoon, see Anne Marsh Penton, '"Over the Whole Wood": Robert Graves and the Significance of David Thomas', *Gravesiana,* 4 (Summer 2018) <https://www.robertgravesreview.org/essay.php?essay=378&tab=6> [accessed 12 August 2023]

[5] Dunstan Ward's analysis in this issue of Graves's 'A Letter from Wales', written in September 1924, points out the significance of faith to Graves and reinforces my belief that the question of faith is alive for Graves at this time.
[6] Edward Lear, 'The Owl and the Pussycat' in *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets* (London: Robert John Bushy,1871), pp. [unnumbered]
[7] Siegfried Sassoon, 'At Carnoy' in *The Old Huntsman.* New American Ed. (New York: Dutton, 1918), p. 32. Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/oldhuntsmanother00sass/page/32/mode/2up> [accessed 14 August 2023]
[8] Siegfried Sassoon, 'Attack' in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1918).