
Poetic Correspondence: The Verse Letters of Robert Graves

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Abstract: Through the series of verse letters that they exchanged, this article traces the intense relationship between Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon during the First World War, and its decline after Sassoon learnt that Graves was marrying Nancy Nicholson; Graves's 'A Letter from Wales' is examined in detail.

Keywords: verse letters, friendship, love, homosexuality, marriage, war, battle, death, identity, memory, trauma.

Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon first met at the front in northern France on 28 November 1915, in the village of Festubert in the Pas-de-Calais. Graves was twenty; Sassoon was almost nine years older. Over the next three years they exchanged a series of verse letters which reveal the strength and intensity of the relationship between the two Royal Welch Fusiliers. Graves's war poems, Michael Longley affirms, 'are love poems in their way',¹ and this is nowhere truer than in these verse letters to Sassoon. Then, six years later, Graves wrote his last and longest in the series, 'A Letter from Wales', looking back over their 'lovely friendship'² and asking why it failed.

Graves posted Sassoon a typescript of the poem, a carbon copy emended in ink,³ on 13 September 1924, while he and his wife Nancy Nicholson were staying with his parents and relatives at the Graves holiday house near Harlech. Below the text on the fifth and last page of the typescript, evidently produced for publication, 'ROBERT GRAVES' is typed in capital letters; Graves has enclosed his name in a rectangle and

written ‘With affection | from’ above it. In the remaining space on the page, he has written ‘We return on the 28th | Have you any objection to above on personal or | poetical grounds?’ In the event, they returned to their cottage at Islip, outside Oxford, on the 20th.⁴ The poem appeared in the first issue of a new literary journal, *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, in March 1925 (there was also a poem by Sassoon), and Graves included it in his next collection, *Welchman’s Hose*, which was published by the Fleuron Press in September that year, one of Graves’s most elegant volumes, with wood engravings by Paul Nash.

‘A Letter from Wales’ has not attracted much critical attention; D. N. G. Carter doesn’t mention it in the most substantial study of the poetry, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (1989). And yet it is, as Michael Longley characterises it in the Introduction to his Faber *Selected*, ‘a rich, complex’ poem, an ‘informally cadenced meditation on war and friendship, on death, identity and poetry’.⁵

For the verse letter genre, two of Graves’s most obvious models were Pope, whose ‘Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot’ is an anthology standard, and Pope’s model, Horace, endlessly translated at public schools like Charterhouse (Graves quotes a line from one of his *Epistles* in an early poem, ‘Marigolds’).⁶

Below the title of ‘A Letter from Wales’ – just ‘A Letter’ on the typescript – is the headnote, ‘Richard Rolls to his friend, Captain Abel Wright.’ This has a footnote: ‘The characters are fictitious; the setting is unhistorical.’ It is revised in *Welchman’s Hose* as ‘The characters and incidents are unhistorical’, and omitted in Graves’s 1926/27 *Collected Poems*, maybe because it begs key questions in the text. Graves then dropped the poem altogether from the canon.

The pseudonyms ‘Richard Rolls’ and ‘Abel Wright’ are evocative. ‘Richard’ neatly matches ‘Robert’, and Richard is one of the characters in *The Shout* (also 1924), while ‘Dick’ is

the name Graves gives in *Good-bye to All That* to ‘Peter’ Johnstone, the Charterhouse pupil four years younger that he was in love with. Sassoon, in *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* (1928), calls David Thomas, the young lieutenant they both loved, ‘Dick Tiltwood’; and in Graves’s 1930 play *But It Still Goes On* Dick Tompion is the Graves-like character to whom the Sassoon-like homosexual David Casselis’s attitude is ‘repressedly romantic’.⁷ That of course is in the future. Rolls may allude ironically to the Rolls-Royce that Sassoon offered as a wedding present to Graves and Nancy; he kept well away from the actual wedding ceremony. ‘Abel’ indicates Sassoon’s Jewish origins; Saul Kane (spelt with a ‘K’) is Sassoon’s pen-name and the narrator’s in *The Daffodil Murderer*, his 1913 pastiche of John Masefield. And, of course, in the Book of Genesis Abel is killed by his brother, Cain ... ‘Wright’ (as in ‘playwright’) means ‘maker’, and ‘makar’ is a Scottish word for a poet. Could there even be a hint that in the end Sassoon was ‘right’?

Sassoon started the poetic correspondence with ‘A Letter Home’, written while he was on a course at the Flixécourt army school some thirty miles from the front.⁸ Dated ‘May 1916’, its tone is intimate:

Robert, when I drowse to-night,
 Skirting lawns of sleep to chase
 Shifting dreams in mazy light,
 Somewhere then I’ll see your face
 Turning back to bid me follow. (sect. 2 ll. 1–5)

The poem then invokes David Thomas, who was killed a month before, yet now ‘sings in every place / Where we’re thinking of his face’ (sect. 4 ll. 13–14). The imagery of oaks and brooks and blossoms recalls Graves’s similar but more subtle use of it in his poignant poem ‘Not Dead’ (*Goliath and David* (1916)), written the day after Thomas’s death and

doubtless read by Sassoon: ‘Caressingly I stroke | Rough bark of the friendly oak. [...] Over the whole wood in a little while | Breaks his slow smile’ (ll. 4–5, 10–11). In Sassoon’s ‘Shifting dreams’ Thomas’s face is subsumed into Graves’s face, with its ‘Crooked smile’. The poem concludes (sect. 5 ll. 15–16): ‘War’s a joke for me and you | While we know such dreams are true!’

‘A Letter from Wales’ begins:⁹

This is a question of identity
Which I can't answer. Abel, I'll presume
On your good-nature, asking you to help me.
I hope you will, since you too are involved
As deeply in the problem as myself.
Who are we? (ll. 1–6)

Richard Rolls expounds to Abel Wright his ‘view’ that their former ‘selves’ were ‘lost’ during the war, and replaced by ‘substitutes’ – twice. A ‘question of identity’ also arises for Graves’s critics and biographers. As Dominic Hibberd demonstrated in a paper at the Oxford centenary conference in 1995, Graves 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 *Good-bye to All That* (1929). [...] The character many readers saw, and some still see, in *Good-bye* 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.¹⁰

And this is in effect what Richard Rolls asks Abel Wright to do:

Take down your old diary, please,
The one you kept in France, if you are you
Who served in the Black Fusiliers with me.
That is, again, of course, if I am I –
[...]

Turn up the date,
July the twenty-fourth, nineteen-sixteen,
And read the entry there:

*'To-day I met
Meredith, transport-sergeant of the Second.
He told me that Dick Rolls had died of wounds.
I found out Doctor Dunn, and he confirms it;
Dunn says he wasn't in much pain, he thinks.'*
(ll. 6–9, 12–18)

Richard claims to be trying to distinguish 'facts' from what he terms 'romance' (ll. 25, 68). If we try to do this too, we find that the poem itself reproduces and reinforces the 'substitution' process it ostensibly is examining.

It is the entry for 21 July 1916 in Sassoon's diary that in fact records: 'And now I've heard that Robert died of wounds yesterday, in an attack on High Wood.' Graves was near-fatally injured on the 20th, not the 24th, but for symbolic effect the poem advances the date to 'the day he came of age' (l. 23). Sassoon continues:

And I've got to go on as if there were nothing wrong.
So he and Tommie are together, & perhaps I'll join
them soon. [...] And only two days ago I was copying
his last poem into my notebook – a poem full of his best
qualities of sweetness & sincerity, full of heart-breaking
gaiety & hope. So all our travels to 'the great, greasy
Caucasus' are quelled. And someone called Peter will
be as sad as I am. Robert might have been a great poet;

he could never have been a dull one. In him I thought I had found a lifelong friend to work with.¹¹

What Sassoon believed to be Graves's 'last poem' was 'To S.S.', a manuscript version of 'Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood' (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)), his response to Sassoon's 'A Letter Home', and written after their encounter near Fricourt on the Somme on 14 July. Dated the 17th, it is an exuberant fantasy about their future travels together in 'jolly old "après la guerre"', first to Robert's 'country seat', his cottage in Wales, and then to more distant places, notably Bagdad, to visit the Sassoon 'ancestral vault'. Both Peter Johnstone and David Thomas were originally mentioned at the end:¹²

(This Peter still may win a part
Of David's corner in your heart.
I hope so.) & one day we three
Shall sail together on the sea
For adventure & quest & fight
And God! what Poetry we'll write!

As foreseen in the poem, Graves and Sassoon actually went up to Harlech in August 1916, while Graves was recovering from his wounds, Sassoon having been sent home too with suspected lung troubles. These weeks in Harlech were undoubtedly the period in their relationship when Graves and Sassoon were closest. They even planned to publish a joint collection of poems, to be titled *Two Fusiliers*, like the love lyric Graves wrote at this time, which declares, that 'there's no need for pledge or oath | To bind our lovely friendship fast' (st.1 ll. 3–4), and 'Show me the two so closely bound | As we, by the wet bond of blood.' (st. 3 ll. 1–2)

'But Sassons, I *did* die' Graves insists in another verse letter dating from 9 August, an illustrated version of his poem

‘Escape’ (*Goliath and David* (1916)); in ‘A Letter from Wales’, Richard’s ‘view’, forced on him by ‘the facts’, is that it was ‘a second Richard Rolls’ who was there at Harlech (ll. 24–25), and that with him was with his friend’s ‘substitute’ (l. 44), since the first Abel had been ‘killed the same month at the Rectangle’ (l. 33), ‘the Quadrangle’ in *Good-bye to All That*, where the poem’s colourful account of his exploit is rather toned down.¹³

Richard Rolls asserts that ‘the I now talking’ – the ‘letter’ resembles a dramatic monologue –

is an honest I,
Independent of the I’s now lost.
And a live dog’s as good as a dead lion’ (ll. 50–52)¹⁴

He recalls how

These two friends, the second of the series,
Came up to Wales pretending a wild joy
That they had cheated Death: they stayed together
At the same house and ate and drank and laughed
And wrote each other’s poems, much too lazy
To write their own, and sat up every night
Talking and smoking almost until dawn.
Yes, they enjoyed life, but unless I now
Confound my present feeling, with the past, †
They felt a sense of unreality
In the proceedings – stop! that’s good, *proceedings*,
It suggests ghosts. (ll. 53–64)

Crucial to the entire text is that ‘reminiscence from Wordsworth’s “Nutting”’ (footnote), ‘Unless I now | Confound my present feeling, with the past’. It raises the problem of the reliability of memory, the way memory reconstructs the past, inventing and suppressing; the way the

present self tells the story of former selves, revising with hindsight and wish-fulfilment and, perhaps, self-deception.

Likewise crucial is the phrase ‘a sense of unreality’, with the suggestion of ‘ghosts’. As Hugh Haughton comments,

this is true of the whole poem, with its baffling sense of heightened circumstantial reality as well as ‘sense of unreality’ [...]. Its dizzying play on the multiple, interchangeable identities of the two soldiers generates a sense of multiple haunting. We could attribute this to Graves’s ‘war neurosis’ (or that of ‘Richard Rolls’ the letter-writer), but also to a larger post-traumatic sense of identity after the war.¹⁵

With regard to trauma, in an article on ‘Responses to Wounds in the First World War’ Chris Nicholson provides valuable insights into the narrative mode and structure of ‘A Letter from Wales’ (though he doesn’t discuss the poem itself). ‘Writers who fought in the First World War often use narrative methods that reflect the divisions, existential confusions and conflicts enforced by the war.’ He makes the further point that

for those who suffer traumatic wounding, whether physical, psychological or both, the experience comes to be seen as a pronounced dividing line in their lives marking an irreversible change, a change which structures future experience. In an attempt to heal this fracture such a writer may be unconsciously compelled to repeat their wounding until they can find a way in which it can be assimilated. Those repetitions can be internally held and projected into poetry or prose [...]. In reference to the ‘repetition compulsion’, the psychiatrist Paul Russell writes that it ‘becomes a disorder in which memory is confused with perception. To whatever

degree there has been a trauma, it is inappropriately over-remembered and rendered as present experience. Trauma *is* that which gets compulsively repeated'.¹⁶

'A Letter to Wales' strikingly manifests these patterns of fracture, of compulsive repetition, and the confusion of memory and perception. 'Repetition compulsion' aptly applies to the manner in which Richard shapes his narrative of the two friends' traumatic woundings, first his own and Abel's in July 1916 on the Somme, then that of Abel's 'substitute's,

Shot through the throat while bombing up a trench
At Bullecourt; if not there, then at least
On the thirteenth of July, nineteen eighteen,
Somewhere in the neighbourhood of Albert,
When you took a rifle bullet through the skull
Just after breakfast on a mad patrol. (ll. 144– 49)

The 'second Richard', after the Armistice, dies of pneumonia at Hove (where Graves kept himself from succumbing to 'Spanish influenza' in February 1919 by taking his ingenious sonnet 'The Troll's Nosegay' through thirty-five drafts).¹⁷

Memory and perception are interfused as Richard attempts to isolate 'one thing' that 'really happened' in Wales, something that seems 'too circumstantial for romance' (ll. 65–68). A 'sense of unreality' nevertheless pervades his description:

Listen, it was a sunset. We were out
Climbing the mountain, eating blackberries
[...]
By a wide field of tumbled boulderstones
Hedged with oaks and nut-trees. Gradually
A glamour spread about us, the low sun
Making the field unreal as a stage,

Gilding our faces with heroic light;
Then oaks and nut-boughs caught this golden flood,
Sending it back in a warm flare of green ...[.] (ll. 71–72,
82–88)

Richard is in effect staging the scene. ‘Gilding’ has noble or quasi-saintly connotations, while ‘heroic light’ (‘angelic’ in the typescript) is evocative of the war, as is that ‘flare of green’.

There was a mountain-ash among the boulders,
But too full-clustered and symmetrical
And highly coloured to convince as real. (ll. 89–91)

This is presumably Yggdrasil, the sacred ash tree at the centre of the world in Norse mythology; some scholars take its name to signify ‘gallows’.

We stopped blackberrying and someone said
(Was it I or you?) ‘It is good for us to be here.’
The other said, ‘Let us build Tabernacles’
(In honour of a new Transfiguration;
It was that sort of moment); but instead
I climbed up on the massive pulpit stone,
An old friend, but unreal with the rest,
And prophesied – not indeed of the future,
But declaimed poetry, and you climbed up too
And prophesied. The next thing I remember
Was a dragon scaly with fine-weather clouds
Poised high above the sun, and the sun dwindling
And then the second glory. (ll. 92–104)

The passage is an extraordinary re-enactment and transposition of the event in the New Testament when Jesus took three of his apostles up a ‘high mountain’ and ‘was

transfigured before them, and his face did shine as the sun'.¹⁸ The Fusiliers are cast as apostles, repeating the same words that St Peter spoke to Christ, and from the pulpit of nature they declaim sacred texts of 'the god called Poetry' (*Country Sentiment* (1920)).

The 'dragon', emblem of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, may be a reminder of the war (though it could be the malignant dragon in 'Vanity' (*Welchman's Hose*), first published with this poem as 'Essay on Knowledge': 'Be assured, the Dragon is not dead').

In the slang of the First World War, a battle was a 'show': Graves exploits this oddly unreal, anaesthetising term in the lines that follow, with their grimly ironic detachment:

You'll remember
 That we were not then easily impressed
 With pyrotechnics, whether God's or Man's.
 We had seen the sun rise daily, weeks on end,
 And watched the nightly rocket-shooting, varied
 With red and green, and livened with gun-fire
 And the loud single-bursting overgrown squib
 Thrown from the minen-werfer: and one night
 From a billet-window some ten miles away
 We had watched the French making a mass-attack
 At Notre Dame de Lorette, in a thunderstorm.
 That was a grand display of all the Arts,
 God's, Man's, the Devil's: in the course of which,
 So lavishly the piece had been stage-managed,
 A Frenchman was struck dead by a meteorite,
 That was the sort of gala-show it was! (ll. 104–119)

Here, 'a sense of unreality' is created by dismissing the sunrise and the night flares alike as 'pyrotechnics', a mere fireworks display, with the German mortar shell reduced to an 'overgrown squib'; and viewing the French mass-attack (also

in *Good-Bye to All That*, pp. 142–43) just as a ‘spectacle’, a lavishly stage-managed ‘gala-show’.

But this Welsh sunset, what shall I say of it?
 It ended not at all as it began,
 An influence rather than a spectacle
 Raised to a strange degree beyond all wonder.
 And I remember that we looked and found
 A region of the sky below the dragon
 Where we could gaze behind all time and space
 And see as it were the colour of pure thought,
 The texture of emptiness, and at that sight
 We came away, not daring to see more:
 Death was the price, we knew, of such perfection.
 (ll. 120–30)

On the personal level, the sunset is the culmination of their ‘lovely friendship’, and the climax of their Harlech idyll. In the context of scripture, after the Transfiguration Jesus commands the apostles to tell no one of the vision until the Son of Man has risen again from the dead.¹⁹ And on the poetic and psychological level, Chris Nicholson argues that Graves, ‘an extremely religious man’, utilising his reading of pre-Christian history, religion and myth, transformed his wartime wounding ‘into a transfiguration, death and rebirth. The notion of transfiguration and the imagery of being struck or pierced which is a clear reverberation of his war wounds, is evident throughout his poetry’.²⁰

The unearthly, oxymoronic lines where the pair ‘gaze behind all time and space | And see as it were the colour of pure thought,’ (ll. 126–27) evokes a state not unlike nirvana. Or is it an intimation of the ‘unknowable deity’ that has been Graves’s philosophical preoccupation in the books immediately preceding *Welchman’s Hose*?²¹ Is it akin to a

near-death experience, and, as such part of the post-trauma pattern?

On their way home they ‘fall in’, as if inevitably, with the very person from the Harlech Golf Club who back in July 1914 arranged for Robert Graves to join the Royal Welch Fusiliers; here his name is Todd, an anglicising pronunciation of the German word for death.²² Captain Todd wonders, ‘What writer could have done real justice’ to ‘that splendid sunset’ – ‘Except, of course, my old friend Walter Pater? | Ruskin perhaps? Yes, Ruskin might have done it’ (ll. 134–37). And so the most intense experience is aestheticized, reduced to a display of fine writing – like, for that matter, Richard’s (or Graves’s) own lines above ...

‘Well, *did* that happen, or am I just romancing?’ (l. 138) Richard asks (‘romancing’ in more than one sense of the word). After the loss of these second selves, at Arras and at Hove,

I think the I and you who then took over
Rather forgot the part we used to play;
We wrote and saw each other often enough²³
And sent each other copies of new poems,
But there was a constraint in all our dealings,
A doubt, unformulated, but quite heavy
And not too well disguised. Something we guessed
Arising from the War, and yet the War
Was a forbidden ground of conversation.
Now *why*, can you say *why*, short of accepting
My substitution view? (ll. 157–167)

The ‘constraint’ and ‘doubt’ are surely not unconnected to the suppression, in their conversation and in this ‘letter’, of painful wartime episodes affecting their ‘lovely friendship’. The first was Sassoon’s public protest in July 1917 against the continuation of the war, and Graves’s central role in saving

him from a court-martial and having him sent instead to the war hospital at Craiglockhart near Edinburgh (where they met Wilfred Owen). Graves wrote to Eddie Marsh on 12 July that he personally thought Sassoon was 'quite right in his views but absolutely wrong in his action'.²⁴ And he told Sassoon that 'the exact people' that he wished to influence and save, officers like 'Tommie', would be offended by breaking his contract: 'they'll only think it "bad form" and that you're not acting like a gentleman'. Sassoon accused him of lacking 'real courage'.²⁵ In Max Egremont's judgement, 'Sassoon may never have forgiven his rescuer'.²⁶

'This S. S. business has taken me at a very bad time', Graves admits in the same 12 July 1917 letter to Marsh: he had received that day 'the worst possible news about my friend Peter'. Johnstone had been accused in a Surrey magistrate's court of inciting a military police corporal to 'commit an act of gross indecency with him'. The case was eventually dismissed, with Johnstone placed in medical care, but it was reported indignantly in the popular weekly *John Bull* and Graves was sent a cutting.²⁷ 'This news was nearly the end of me,' he wrote twelve years later in *Good-Bye to All That*. 'It would be easy to think of him as dead.'²⁸

Graves's romantic vision of Johnstone and their love relationship had sustained him through all the wartime horrors: 'Dear, you've been everything that I most lack | In these soul-deadening trenches', he wrote in his poem '1915' (*Over the Brazier* (1916)). In October 1915 he had described him to Marsh in idealistic terms as 'my best friend, a poet long before I'll ever be one, a radiant & unusual creature' [...], 'and tho' now in the first half-dozen of VIth Form at Ch'house he's still whole-some minded and clean-living.'²⁹

Good-Bye to All That states that 'In English preparatory and public schools romance is necessarily homo-sexual. The opposite sex is despised and hated, treated a something obscene. Many boys never recover from this perversion. I

only recovered by a shock at the age of twenty-one.’³⁰ This ‘cataclysm’³¹ brought into question Graves’s love for Johnstone, and his principal friendships in his homosexual literary circle – with Ross, with Marsh, and above all with Sassoon.

In *Good-Bye to All That* Graves moved the Johnstone episode back from July 1917 to late October 1915 (despite that previous reference to being twenty-one when it happened). Jean Moorcroft Wilson has suggested that he may have done so to prevent readers from linking it with his abrupt switch to heterosexual attachments, first, briefly, with a nurse at Somerville College Hospital, and then, after he learnt she was ‘fond of someone else’, with Nancy Nicholson.³² A previous biographer, his nephew Richard Perceval Graves, explains that this part of *Good-Bye* is ‘clearly written from memory.’³³ One does not exclude the other.

After weighing up the various ‘possible reasons’ for his involvement with Nancy Nicholson, Jean Moorcroft Wilson concludes, ‘But perhaps the strongest, though most hidden reason of all for this sudden romantic attachment to a woman was Graves’s need to dissociate himself from Johnstone and any connection with homosexuality.’³⁴

Graves’s courtship of Nancy Nicholson from October 1917 and their marriage in January 1918 constituted a turning point in his relationship with Sassoon. At the last minute he changed the dedication of *Fairies and Fusiliers* to the Royal Welch Fusiliers instead of Sassoon, supposedly ‘for fear of jealousy’ among his “‘friends and lovers’”.³⁵ In her biography of Sassoon, Jean Moorcroft Wilson contends that learning from Graves about his forthcoming marriage may have been partly responsible for Sassoon’s going before a medical board and returning to the front, even if his main motive was to rejoin his men.³⁶ Sassoon wrote to Graves on 21 November 1917 that he no longer cared whether he lived or died.³⁷

Six months later Graves sent a piercing verse letter to Sassoon from Bryn-y-Pin, the farmhouse in North Wales where he and Nancy were lodging above the Royal Welch Fusiliers camp while he was training officer cadets. As I suggested to Dominic Hibberd, ‘The deep feeling in this poem partly comes from [Graves’s] recognition that his friendship with Sassoon can never regain its former intimacy’.³⁸ It was Dominic Hibberd who discovered ‘A Letter from Wales’ together with other unpublished wartime poems in the typescript of ‘The Patchwork Flag’ in the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection, and gave them their first printing in a ground-breaking article in 1990.³⁹

‘Letter to S.S. from Bryn-y-Pin’ was provoked by a letter from Sassoon at the end of June 1918, complaining angrily about Graves’s long silence; Graves detected ‘jealousy’. He included ten lines of an initial version of the poem in a letter dated 16 July, but Sassoon had already been invalided out after taking that ‘rifle bullet through the skull’ (‘A Letter from Wales’, l. 148) three days before; it was exactly two years, Graves pointed out, since he wrote his ‘Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood’.

Graves sees Sassoon as

aggrieved with fate
That lets you lag in France so late,
When all our friends of two years past
Are free of trench and wire at last
[...]
Where you, linger, lone and drear,
Last of the flock, poor Fusilier. (ll. 1–4, 9–10)

Sassoon protested, ‘I *wasn’t* lone and drear’. I was filled with a deeper passion than ever before; & *much better* at the job of soldiering. [...] I would like you to wash out the impression of a disconsolate survivor, because it isn’t true at all.’⁴⁰ Did

Graves *want* Sassoon to be feeling ‘lone and drear’ without him?

In the poem, Sassoon’s ‘brief letters home pretend | Anger and scorn that this false friend | This fickle Robert [...]

Now snugly lurks at home to nurse
His wounds without complaint, and worse
Preaches ‘The Bayonet’ to Cadets
On a Welsh hill-side, grins, forgets.
That now he rhymes of trivial things
Children, true love and robins’ wings
[...]
‘*Guilty*’ I plead, and by that token
Confess my haughty spirit broken
And my pride gone. (ll. 11–13, 17–22, 27–29)

This contrasts sharply with ‘Lucasta he’s a Fusilier | And his pride keeps him here’.⁴¹ The proud mask has dropped, exposing the survivor’s post-traumatic torment:

now the least chance
Of backward thought begins a dance
Of marionettes that jerk cold fear
Against my sick mind: either ear
Rings with dark cries, my frightened nose
Smells gas in scent of hay or rose,
I quake dumb horror, till again
I view that dread La Bassée plain
Drifted with smoke and groaning under
The echoing strokes of rival thunder
That crush surrender from me now. (ll. 29–39)

Twelve months before, after his wounding at Mametz Wood, his prayer to Mars the god of war was ‘Let me forget’ (l. 46); but if the war has become ‘forbidden ground’ in ‘A Letter

from Wales' (l. 165), here the trauma is 'compulsively repeated'.⁴²

Within the logic of the poem's argument, these lines offer an explanation, and some mitigation, for the neglect of his 'lone' friend: he seldom dares

search behind
In those back cupboards of [his] mind
Where lurk the bogeys of old fear' (ll. 51–53).

Yet they don't quite show how this makes him 'false' and 'fickle' (ll. 12–13). Hence, perhaps, his admission:

Guilty! I've no excuse to give
While in such cushioned ease I live
With Nancy. (ll. 47–49)

To name her, at last, is surely to offer another explanation for his reluctance, 'To think of you, to feel you near | By our old bond, poor Fusilier' (ll. 54–55). Those ruefully tender concluding lines are to remind them both of those 'Two Fusiliers', 'so closely bound | By the wet bond of blood'.

From his London hospital bed on 24 July 1918, Sassoon wrote Graves a final verse letter. It begins: 'Dear Roberto, | I'd timed my death in action to the minute'. In *Good-Bye to All That* Graves calls it 'the most terrible of his war-poems'.⁴³ It is certainly the most radical in technique and inventive in use of language. It is also doubtless the most honest, an unsparing portrait of his conflicting selves – romantic poet, sardonic satirist, would-be hero, death-driven homosexual.... Referring to yet another request by Graves for financial help, he replies: 'Yes, you can touch my banker when you need him. | Why keep a Jewish friend unless you bleed him?'⁴⁴ The letter finishes: 'Does this break your heart? What do I care? Sassons' [sic]. It is so devastatingly revealing that one can

only wonder at Graves's motives in reproducing it without permission in *Good-Bye to All That*, all the more in view of the note below 'A Letter from Wales' asking if he has 'any objection'. Unsurprisingly, this time Sassoon did object, and obliged Graves and his publisher to remove it from the book.

'A Letter from Wales' is reaching towards a conclusion when the third Richard Rolls finds a 'relic' of the second one, 'A pack-valise marked with his name and rank' (ll. 169–70). This is something more 'circumstantial' than that Welsh sunset, whose 'romance' (l. 68) is emphasised by the lustreless sunset that now starts,

most unlike the other,
A pink-and-black depressing sort of show
Influenced by the Glasgow School of Art.
It sent me off on a long train of thought
And I began to feel badly confused,
Being accustomed to this newer self;
I wondered whether you could reassure me. (ll. 171–77)

The poem's opening is then recapitulated (ll. 178–182), and it ends with what Michael Longley hears as a *cri de cœur*:

Now I have asked you, do you see my point?
What I'm asking really isn't 'Who am I?'
Or 'Who are you?' (you see my difficulty?)
But a stage before that, 'How am I to put
The question that I'm asking you to answer?'

One way to put it might have been, quite simply, 'Are you still fond of me?'

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NOTES

¹ *Robert Graves: Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber, 2013), p. xx.

² ‘Two Fusiliers’ (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)), st. 1 l. 4.

³ In the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

⁴ See Richard Perceval Graves’s meticulous reconstruction of their visit in *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895–1926* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), pp. 300–02.

⁵ *Robert Graves: Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley, p. xix.

⁶ ‘Marigolds’ (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)), st. 1 ll. 1–2: ‘With a fork drive Nature out, / She will ever yet return’ (*Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret*, Horace, *Epistles*, I. 10, 24.)

⁷ *But It Still Goes On: An Accumulation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 213.

⁸ Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems 1908–1956* (London: Faber, 1961), pp. 40–43.

⁹ Unless stated otherwise, quotations from ‘A Letter from Wales’ are from the text in *Poems (1914–26)* (London: Heinemann, 1927), reprinted (with four editorial emendations to spelling and punctuation) in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, vol. 1 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) and *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

¹⁰ Dominic Hibberd, ‘A “Spirit Above Wars”: Robert Graves’s Self-Portrait as Soldier and Poet, 1915–29’, *Gravesiana*, 3 (Summer 2010), pp. 290–91.

¹¹ University of Cambridge: Cambridge Digital Library, Sassoon Journals, Journal 26 June 1916–12 Aug. 1916 (MS Add.9852/1/7,

folio 34^f) <<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-09852-00001-00007/69>> [accessed 30 July 2023]

¹² Sassoon Journals, 20 May 1916–31 Oct. 1916 (MS Add.9852/1/6 enc.)

<<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-09852-00001-00006/123>> (Cited in *Robert Graves: War Poems*, ed. by Charles Mundye (Bridgend, Wales: 2016), pp. 305–06).

¹³ Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), ed. by Fran Brearton (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 262–63.

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 9. 4: ‘For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.’

¹⁵ Hugh Haughton, ‘Graves and Ghosts’, *Gravesiana*, 3 (Summer 2012), pp. 438–71.

¹⁶ Chris Nicholson, ‘Repetition or Containment? Responses to Wounds in the First World War: Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway and Wilfred Owen’, *Gravesiana*, 4 (Summer 2018), pp. 514–37.

¹⁷ See *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 395; the note on ‘The Troll’s Nosegay’ in *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 364–65; and Paul O’Prey, ‘Robert Graves’s Favourite Poem? The One that Saved his Life’, *Robert Graves Review*, 1 (Summer 2021), pp. 51–58.

¹⁸ Matthew 17. 1–8.

¹⁹ Matthew 17. 9.

²⁰ Chris Nicholson, ‘Repetition or Containment?’, p. 522.

²¹ J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves, Writers and Critics* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 40.

²² *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 97.

²³ Rarely, in actual fact: see *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946*, ed. by Paul O’Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 126.

²⁴ *In Broken Images*, p. 77.

²⁵ *In Broken Images*, p. 85.

²⁶ Max Egremont, ‘Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon’, in *The Art of Collaboration: Essays on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries*, ed. by Dunstan Ward, Joan Miquel Fiol and Juana María Seguí (Palma, Mallorca: Universitat de les Illes Balears, 2008), pp. 29–43 (p. 34).

²⁷ For a full account of the case, see Eric J. Webb, “‘An Indecent Proposal’”, *Gravesiana*, 4 (Summer 2018), pp. 462–73.

²⁸ *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 217.

²⁹ *In Broken Images*, p. 35.

³⁰ *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 33.

³¹ Graves to Robert Nichols, no date [November 1917], *In Broken Images*, p. 89.

³² Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to Good-bye to All That (1895–1929)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 193–95.

³³ *The Assault Heroic*, p. 351, n. 252.

³⁴ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Robert Graves*, p. 208.

³⁵ Graves to Sassoon, 13 September 1917, *In Broken Images*, p. 82.

³⁶ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet: A Biography 1886–1918* (London: Duckworth, 1998), pp. 425, 431.

³⁷ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p. 425.

³⁸ Dominic Hibberd, ‘A “Spirit Above Wars”’, p. 308, n. 30.

³⁹ Dominic Hibberd, ‘“The Patchwork Flag” (1918): An Unrecorded Book by Robert Graves’, *Review of English Studies*, new series, XLI, 164 (1990), pp. 521–32. The poem is reprinted in *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, pp. 392–93, and the Penguin Classics edition, pp. 810–11.

⁴⁰ Ms. with ts. (Berg); reproduced in *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, p. 550.

⁴¹ ‘To Lucasta on Going to the Wars – for the Fourth Time’ (*Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917)).

⁴² Chris Nicholson, ‘Repetition or Containment?’, p. 521.

⁴³ *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 343. The complete text appears on pp. 343–46; for details of the ‘garbled’ version Graves originally reproduced but was obliged to remove, see p. 466, notes 11–16.

⁴⁴ *Good-Bye to All That*, p. 344 (p. 466, n. 12: ‘Graves omitted this couplet.’).

