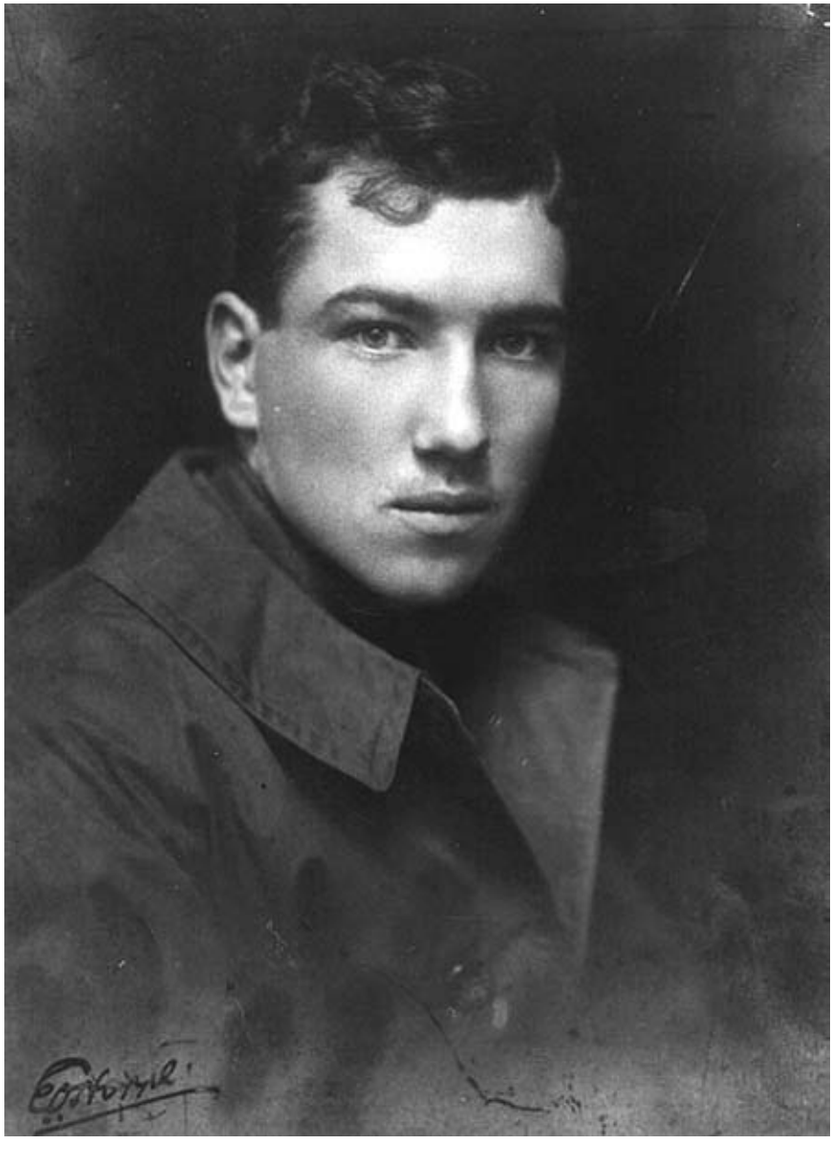
Thomas G. Palaima, “Robert Graves’s War Poems,” In Wm. Roger Louis, ed., *Irrepressible Adventures with Britannia*: *Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain* (November 2013) pp. 137-150.

For convenience, I append here two poems discussed in the chapter, but not printed in the chapter:

Robert Graves, “Nursery Memories I.—The First Funeral”

Wilfred Owen, “Dulce Et Decorum Est”



Robert Graves, 1915. This item is from the First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford (www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit); © The Robert Graves Literary Estate.

10

Robert Graves's War Poems

TOM PALAIMA

In 1941, Robert Graves was asked, as a "poet of the last war," to comment on the poetry that was already being written during the Second World War. He rightly pointed out that the terms *war poet* and *war poetry* were "first used in World War I and perhaps peculiar to it." He then spent almost his entire essay explaining how war poems came to be "published by the thousand" during the First World War and why, when he was publishing his own *Collected Poems* in 1938, he "could not conscientiously reprint any of my 'war poems'—they were too obviously written in the war-poetry boom."[1] There was indeed a great poetry boom during the Great War. Depending on how British war poets are specified, their number exceeds 2,000.

This choice by Graves has made his war poetry less well known than similar works by his contemporaries. The editor of a recent anthology of the "essential" poetry of the First World War considers it a significant achievement "to include some of the war poetry of Robert Graves which he suppressed for over half a century."[2]

Graves's decision is puzzling. What did he think a First World War war poem was? Why did he think that writing war poems during what he calls a war-poetry boom made them unfit to be included among other poems he had written? Would he have applied the same criteria, in 1941 or at any time, to the poems of, say, Siegfried Sassoon? Was Graves trying to dissociate his war poems from those

of hundreds of soldier-poets who, despite the morally unjustifiable statistics of suffering (65,000,000 soldiers mobilized; 8,500,000 killed and died; over 21,000,000 wounded), "continued to write in unironic terms about duty, glory and honour" and to "accept the righteousness of the war and the nobility of the soldiers' sacrifices"? Did Graves view his own war poems as somehow different from those of canonical war poets such as Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who "reacted against the war with bitterness, outrage, and a burning desire to enlighten an indifferent and ignorant public"?[3]

Graves may have suppressed his war poems and limited their original publication because he felt ambivalent about how well they conveyed his own attitudes toward a war in which he fought and was wounded so severely that he was officially declared dead. He may also have doubted how well his war poems reflected his post-war thinking about war as a social phenomenon.

Graves was a well-trained classicist, and some of his war poems have clear classical themes. "Escape," a *katabasis* (an account of a trip to the underworld), first privately printed in 1916 and inspired by Graves's own near-death experience, and "The Legion," first printed in 1917, have drawn the fullest recent critical attention. An idiosyncratic feature that both share with other of Graves's war poems is the distance he puts between what soldiers experienced during the war and the themes of the poems. It is worth asking why Graves writes this way about the trauma of war. He has peculiar qualities as a war poet that can best be understood in relation to other writers of war myths, ancient and modern.

Of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves, the famous triad of First World War soldier-poets associated directly or indirectly with Craiglockhart War Hospital and the Freudian ideas of Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, Graves strikes me as both the easiest to pigeonhole, as Paul Fussell did, and the hardest to place in the right pigeonholes. If Graves is to be understood as a war poet, he has to be understood in relationship to his memoir *Good-bye to All That*. Fussell considers *Good-bye to All That* a work of fiction, an interpretation that brings up the thorny problem of truth in war writing. To help sort all this out, it will be useful to look into the state of mind, spirit, and temperament Graves was in when he wrote his war poems and later when he produced *Good-bye to All That* in a remarkable, furious, eight-week frenzy from May into July 1929.[4]

I think that the rhetorical stances Graves adopts in some of his war poems are conditioned by symptoms of post-traumatic stress that he developed before he suffered the shocks of war. His symptoms were related to a strict, un-nurturing, unplayful childhood that lacked strong parental or other humanly vital attachments. Graves takes up the same subjects that other war writers, both poets and non-poets, deal with directly, seriously, and with intensely communicated emotions. But Graves's rhetorical strategies put him and his readers at a distance from the strong feelings war evokes. The narrative voice in his war poems is detached and unemotional. Ironically, that psychological distance helps us take in traumatic scenes and events without being too troubled or disturbed by them. This may be partly, too, because we are not among those whom trench warfare caused to be, as Graves later puts it, "bound to one another by a suicidal sacrament."[5]

Graves wrote his war poems in the clean and spare style that the experiences of war imposed on classic war writers like Ernest Hemingway, Tim O'Brien, and George Orwell. Their efforts thereby to capture what is concrete and real can make non-initiates feel left out. With some soldier-poets, including Graves, this may be purposeful. A war story in a poem by Graves may be told, as Bill Broyles remarks generally about stories soldiers are likely to tell, "not to enlighten but to exclude": "Its message is not its content but putting the listener in his place. I suffered, I was there. You were not. Only those facts matter. Everything else is beyond words to tell."[6]

Graves as a war poet keeps his own feelings at a remove. This is very different from what Sassoon and Owen do in their classic poems. Graves's stance is even different from his own unremittingly satirical take on Homer's *Iliad,* as he explains it in the introduction to his translation *The Anger of Achilles: Homer's "Iliad"* (1959). Because of my own feelings about the loss of a former student, good friend, and scholarly collaborator to suicide in Iraq on June 5, 2005, I cannot write about the war poetry of Robert Graves in a purely academic way. Or, to put it another way, I marvel at Graves's own self-willed detachment.

Like most modern readers, I am more comfortable with the canonical war poets Owen and Sassoon because they are not detached. They offer graphic portraits of the senseless waste of human lives caused by the stupidity of those in charge and their indifference to human suffering. The extreme anger they show in trying to get readers on the home front to feel what they and their fellow soldiers have gone through, mostly for senseless reasons, feels modern. Sassoon is angry with civilians who do not share in or even acknowledge the suffering of soldiers in the field, and who support, passively or actively, the governmental decisions that cause deaths and wounding, physical and psychological, on a scale never seen before. These poets use irony to inflict trauma—wound their readers,

humiliate their targets—in an effort to make readers feel what the soldiers suffered and to provide some release of their own frustration and anger.

Graves generally veers away from irony and descriptions of violence, and not just because of his neurasthenia or post-traumatic stress. He grasped the danger in casting pearls of trauma before swine. He may have questioned whether war poems of any sort could produce sympathetic suffering. He may have wondered what purpose would be served if readers were in fact made to feel the cathartic pity and fear of tragedy, and not just suffering per se.

For reasons like these, I think, Graves was horrified at what Sassoon was doing in summer 1917 when he wrote his *non serviam*. Graves took steps to rescue Sassoon from what he saw as a kind of pointless social or political suicide. The staff officers at headquarters and the people back home, as Fussell and many war writers and veterans have documented, were not ever going to "get it." Despite clear and available facts about the scale of carnage and violence wrought upon children, women, and men during wars, modern societies can and will deny the obvious.

Despite his belief that poetry was an act of faith and that poems could "move mountains" short distances, Graves believed firmly in the futility of trying to get the realities of war experiences across to those who have not been through them.[7] So even in his occasional antiwar preaching, Graves lacks conviction. A poem like "The Next War" is without intensity, zeal, or belief, even in its punch lines. We see this when we compare Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" with Graves's poem.

Owen addresses his famous plea directly to his adult readers: do not inspire impressionable young men to desire the false glory of war. His vivid images immerse us in the horror of "men cursing through sludge." Most of these men, before going to war, were in their physical prime. They now are "drunk with fatigue," "knock-kneed," "coughing like hags," "limping," "blood-shod." All of them, Owen asserts hyperbolically, have gone "blind" and "lame." One unfortunate soldier is "guttering," "choking," and "drowning" in what looks to other soldiers through the eye covers of their gas masks like a "green sea." The helpless, suffering soldier "plunges at" the narrator and at us. We feel every jolt of the wagon upon which his dying body has been flung.

In contrast, Graves's poem is addressed to young children themselves—as if they can understand what he is getting at—and secondarily to his readers. He offers a general description of "Kaisers and Czars" tritely strutting the stage and "young friskies" jumping and fighting with "bows and arrows and wooden spears" while "playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers."

You young friskies who today
Jump and fight in Father's hay
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers,
Happy though these hours you spend,
Have they warned you how games end?
Boys, from the first time you prod
And thrust with spears of curtain-rod,
From the first time you tear and slash
Your long-bows from the garden ash,
Or fit your shaft with a blue jay feather,
Binding the split tops together,
From that same hour by fate you're bound
As champions of this stony ground,
Loyal and true in everything,
To serve your Army and your King,
Prepared to starve and sweat and die
Under some fierce foreign sky,
If only to keep safe those joys
That belong to British boys,
To keep young Prussians from the soft
Scented hay of father's loft,
And stop young Slavs from cutting bows
And bendy spears from Welsh hedgerows.
  Another War soon gets begun,
A dirtier, a more glorious one;
Then, boys, you'll have to play, all in;
It's the cruellest team will win.
So hold your nose against the stink
And never stop too long to think.
Wars don't change except in name;
The next one must go just the same,
And new foul tricks unguessed before
Will win and justify this War.
Kaisers and Czars will strut the stage
Once more with pomp and greed and rage;
Courtly ministers will stop
At home and fight to the last drop;
By the million men will die
In some new horrible agony;
And children here will thrust and poke,
Shoot and die, and laugh at the joke,
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers.

"The Next War" shows flashes of Graves's below-the-surface, Sassoon-like anger at governmental ministers who, comfortably at home, "fight to the last drop" of the blood of millions of other men dying "in some new horrible agony." But he does not provide any close-up looks at the agony of soldiers bleeding out those last drops.

Graves's anger likewise shows when he tells the boys that notions of fair play will not prevail when "you'll have to play, all in; / It's the cruelest team will win." But he does not put us in his scenes. Nor does he give us a narrator who provides personalized observations of battle. His most graphic words are tame in comparison with Owen's rich vocabulary of war's horrors. Graves is content with "starve," "sweat," "die" (three times), and "stink." "The Next War" lacks the kind of literal enthusiasm that Graves, as a well-trained scholar of Greek and Latin, deeply believed was necessary to create good poetry.

Graves saw that depictions of trauma and cruelly ironic twists, if imbedded in poetic content that conveyed too much genuine human feeling and if described in vivid and beautiful language, could be used as a kind of sentimental entertainment. Sincere emotions can too easily be philistinely misused, desecrated. And I think he knew and felt this deeply well before he set foot in France.

If we read Graves's descriptions of his early life attentively and with human sympathy, we see that his childhood was not happy or nurturing. He felt anger and dislike toward, and distance from, his father, Alfred, a school inspector. Alfred, father of ten children by two wives, was absorbed in his own educational reform work (having to do in part with sports, which Graves detested) and had no time or inclination to take Graves's youthful writing seriously. The money-obsessed Alfred placed Graves in a succession of preparatory schools that were below his level of intellectual attainment and were not suited to his temperament and spirit. His lack of pocket money, his ready-made clothes, and his disinclination to participate in the sports that his father's reforms promoted marked him out. At home, he lived in an atmosphere of extreme discipline, austerity, strict rules of moral conduct—the biographer Bruce King says that Graves lived in "moral terror"—coldness of disposition, rigid class separation, lack of companionship, Puritanism, prudery, and emotional repression.[8]

Graves describes his parents, home life, the several schools before Charterhouse that his father placed him in, and his years at Charterhouse, where "from my first moment . . . I suffered an oppression of spirit that I hesitate to recall in its full intensity." Graves says that as the eighth of ten children, he related to his mother and father as if they were grandparents—they were forty and forty-nine years old when he was born: "We had a nurse, and one another, and found that companionship sufficient." Moreover, at the age of four and a half, Graves suffered the detachment trauma of being sent off to a public fever hospital, where he first began to grasp the implications of class distinctions.[9]

One place where Graves permits himself the use of irony is worth singling out: his poem "The Persian Version," published in *Collected Poems, 1938–1945* (1946), because it is the exception that proves the rule, as he sees it. The poem operates within the sphere of central or civilian command, a vast distance away from the front lines. It never gets to the suffering of the Persian soldiers who lost their lives on the plains of Marathon in 490 BC.

In fact, Graves classifies the poem not as a poem but as one of his satires or grotesques. And I think that we must take literally the short clarification that he writes in the foreword to *Collected Poems, 1938–1945:* "I write poems for poets and satires and grotesques for wits. For people in general I write prose, and I am content that they should be unaware that I do anything else. To write poems for other than poets is wasteful."[10] Graves has a nearly infinite capacity to be coy, but this statement, at least as it applies to his war writing, strikes me as meant to be taken straight. And it is telling.

> Truth-loving Persians do not dwell upon
> The trivial skirmish fought near Marathon.
> As for the Greek theatrical tradition
> Which represents that summer's expedition
> Not as a mere reconnaissance in force
> By three brigades of foot and one of horse
> (Their left flank covered by some obsolete
> Light craft detached from the main Persian fleet)
> But as a grandiose, ill-starred attempt
> To conquer Greece—they treat it with contempt;
> And only incidentally refute
> Major Greek claims, by stressing what repute
> The Persian monarch and the Persian nation
> Won by this salutary demonstration:
> Despite a strong defence and adverse weather
> All arms combined magnificently together.

Randall Jarrell takes Graves at his word. For Jarrell, Graves is "first and last a poet: in between he is a Graves."[11] But even as a poet, Graves is sui generis.

"The Persian Version" appeals to intellects that are refined

enough to appreciate pure irony, not irony in the service of social causes, least of all social reform. Its witticism is not even designed to bring home an intellectual point. True wits already see the lies, charade, and cruel misfortunes many suffer in life and surely suffer in war. They take delight when one of their kind points out another instance in good literary style. But as Graves, with his deep knowledge of classical texts, would be well aware, they do not feel obliged to do anything about human behaviors that have been manifest in the Western tradition ever since the god-sanctioned suffering brought on by Agamemnon's high-command egotism in the first book of Homer's *Iliad*.

Paul Fussell, in his many critical studies of war, comes close to sharing Graves's attitude and perspectives. But like Sassoon and Owen, Fussell has a different sensibility. All three stand in contrast to Graves because they think what they write can make a difference. Most telling is that Graves says he writes his poems for poets because it is stupid to do otherwise. This implies that his poems do not have general social aims. They are only for special people. Readers like me, and perhaps you, are uninvited guests at an exclusive party.

According to the antagonist Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian,* grasping the realities of war offers insight into the human condition: "Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen the horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance."[12] It is when such insight is falsified or not widely shared within an individual's defining cultural group that psychological wounding, disillusionment, and feelings of alienation and betrayal arise that can explain many of the distinctive symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Tim O'Brien gives some advice on how to tell whether a war story is true or not. In so doing, he is pushing into the territory explored, mapped out, sketched, and painted by McCarthy:

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue.[13]

O'Brien swears allegiance to obscenity and evil in the same way that Owen in "Dulce et Decorum Est" runs a word camera over the face

of the gassed soldier, "a devil's sick of sin." Graves never wants to go where they go, even in his poems.

"The Persian Version" is both a satire and a grotesque. Graves relies on our understanding, from Herodotus's description of Thermopylae and the Persian Empire, that there was one free person among all the human beings in all the different cultures King Darius ruled. Fussell singles out the two ironic concluding lines of the poem as characteristic of Graves's "unsoftened views of the Staff and institutions like it.[14] They are, in my opinion, characteristic of a different kind of irony, one used only when Graves can be sure that it will have the intended effect.

Here the effect is worked on wits who can appreciate that Darius, 1,750 miles away in what we now call Iran (whether Persepolis or Susa), will accept the distant battle at Marathon, a small strip of beach and plain in northeastern Attica, a battle we view as a turning point in Western history, as a minor skirmish in which the officers on the spot report that the troops acquitted themselves well. The mild sarcasm here cuts into the flesh of Western intellectuals who make more of the battle of Marathon than it can bear.

Graves's "The Adventure" (1916) treats how false reports from the field are processed on the front by fighting soldiers and field officers. As in the companion poem "The First Funeral" (1916), Graves taps into nursery memories as he explores experiences that require close observation of the grotesque. In "The Adventure," the German wire party that British machine gunners said they wiped out becomes a fearsome tiger killed in a child's imagination. Inspection of the terrain—impressing what horrors on the imaginations of the soldiers, Graves does not say—reveals no corpses. But if we want a corpse, Graves has already given us one.

In "The First Funeral," a bloated corpse decaying on barbed wire in no-man's-land is a dead dog that Graves and his older sister come upon in 1899, when he was four years old, at the end of Sandy Road where it crosses the golf course. She prods it with a stick. She takes charge of burying it, sprinkling it with wild mint; Graves finds the mint. They give it a burial. Graves and his reader are on the safer terrain of memory, in which he can and does take the action he cannot take in France, at the front. There he has no older sister to tell him what to do, or to do it with him or for him. The dead soldier he finds is hung up on the German wires and couldn't be buried, Graves writes. He never tells us whether the soldier is British or German. The young brother and sister in Graves's memory declaim the kind of short funeral rites that soldiers could take time safely to utter while standing exposed to danger: "Poor dog, Amen!"

Soldiers will self-censor what they know others cannot grasp without distortion or some degree of trivialization, but their own self-imposed silence has a cost. Graves does this, too. There are other examples: the suicide in the trenches that he reports matter-of-factly in *Good-bye to All That* and his vision of a dead enemy soldier in "A Dead Boche" are different strategies of indirection from the one he uses in "The First Funeral." The indifference and incomprehension of noncombatants can be emotionally traumatizing, leading some soldiers to keep inside those things that they consider most personally meaningful, thereby preventing others from committing sacrilege upon their sacred knowledge.

Sometimes soldiers cannot interpret clearly the mysteries of events. Hence, two of the most meaningful commentaries on anything that has happened or been experienced in war are "there it is" and "don't mean nuthin'." Compare Kurt Vonnegut's repeated "And so it goes" in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. This is the tone that Graves strikes in "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.
> 13 July 1915

The poem starts out ready to preach that war is truly hell, but Graves has no heart to be Owen or Sassoon, O'Brien or McCarthy, or Homer. He checks himself. He leaves off. He never drives the moral home. He leaves the German corpse "dribbling black blood from nose and beard." He forces us to walk away from the scene of this single accident of war, just as he had to.

Like rubberneckers driving by a fatal auto accident, we never learn who this dead German is. Graves does not speculate, as O'Brien did in "The Man I Killed," or finally investigate, like Paul Bäumer in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The German corpse remains a dead Boche. He is not *the* dead Boche. He is not Graves's dead German, so he is not ours. And Graves doesn't fantasize or tap into nursery memories of performing shorthand rites. He cannot bring himself to write something like "Poor Boche, Amen," because he never spoke the words "Poor dog, Amen!" His sister did. Four syllables that might be set alongside "there it is" and "don't mean nuthin'" and "and so it goes" are not even murmured in prayer here.

In his short story "The Man I Killed," Tim O'Brien reconstructs an entire imaginary personal life history for an "almost dainty young man of about twenty," a Vietcong soldier he is forced to shoot along a trail, where the enemy's head lay "not quite facing . . . small blue flowers shaped like bells." In contrast, we see how much Graves suppresses in "A Dead Boche" and "The First Funeral." They are Graves poems, singular within the genre of soldiers, of whatever literary talent, expressing their thoughts on a single enemy dead.

Graves has his own way of reading the *Iliad* of Homer, the earliest and still arguably the greatest war poem in Western literature. His version of it, *The Anger of Achilles,* is unsettling. It is what moves Fussell to characterize Graves as a farceur who has never met a lie he didn't like and wouldn't tell.

But this may simply prove that most of us are not ready to accept what Tim O'Brien claims: a true war story has no point, truth does not exist in factual reality, truth does not even exist in a vivid description of a dead corpse. After all, the Greeks knew that what is true is what is unforgettable, the literal meaning of the Greek adjective *a-lēthēs*. And what is unforgettable about a dead soldier on a wire may be that when you came upon it, you wanted to do what your sister helped you do for a dead dog sixteen years before. Graves's devastating takes on all the heroes in the *Iliad* and his championing of the ugly, irritating, ignoble smart aleck Thersites get across what Homer's Trojan War meant to him: the *Iliad* is *Catch-22*.

Why not? Other Greek city-states must have had what Athens had, their own Aristophanes to make them laugh at war's horror. Joseph Heller admitted that he was obsessed with the *Iliad* when young, and that Achilles was the constant model for his central character, Yossarian.

I cannot come completely to terms with Graves's translation of the *Iliad* except as an idiosyncratic modern reading derived from his peculiar psychological background and his war experiences. Given who he was, Graves could not see what one sort of ancient reading must have been. To me, there is one true answer to the question why Homer is so graphically accurate about combat deaths and about the whole futile experience of war. He had to be. His audience knew what war was. They had lived war. The Homeric poems served as

acculturating instruments, in the same way Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and O'Brien's *Things They Carried* are now used in schools, becoming something Graves never intended any of his works to be.

The *Iliad* gives an honest picture of almost all aspects of warfare. The catalogue includes those in command betraying what is right, failing again and again in planning strategies, and having little regard for the well-being of the common troops. The *Iliad* shows us cowardice and courage; the tragedy of war for men, women, and children in a city under attack; combat rage; soldiers having greater sympathies for enemy soldiers than for their own officers or civilian leaders; war fought for dishonorable purposes; prayers to the gods going unanswered; men deriving deep pleasure from violent acts; death and destruction; blind luck and bad luck.

Graves goes through the contents of the *Iliad* and makes it his kind of war poem. He puts a satirical spin on every item. In so doing, he is, in Tim O'Brien's words, "heating up the story," but in his own way. Graves is doing what a Thersites instinctively has to do, but unlike Thersites, Graves aims at producing bitter and intellectualized laughter. Graves's translation of the *Iliad* is a hybrid: part prose—like *Good-bye to All That,* written for the rest of us—and part grotesque, a Graves poem written for wits who could savor the joke.

True war stories reveal truths about our very natures and about the formative and driving principles of our culture. Graves, knowing that these crucial truths were being ignored, decided—who can say he did so wrongly?—that these truths would always be ignored, or at least that his telling of his own truths would serve no purpose.

Graves knew that those who rise to power will never internalize the psychological disturbance of the narrator in O'Brien's "The Man I Killed," or of Remarque's Paul Bäumer as he watches a French soldier die slowly in a shell hole with him, or of the two American GIs, one in the European theater, one in the Pacific, whose thoughts are recorded in Studs Terkel's oral history *The Good War:*

> It was sunshine and quiet. We were passing the Germans we killed. Looking at the individual German dead, each took on a personality. These were no longer an abstraction. They were no longer the Germans of the brutish faces and the helmets we saw in the newsreels. They were exactly our age. These boys were like us.
>
> In Guam, I saw my first dead Japanese. He looked pitiful, with his thick glasses. He had a sheaf of letters in his pocket. He looked like an awkward kid who'd been taken right out of his home to this miserable place.[15]

Graves uses rhetorical distancing to handle the first corpse that he sees. He never places us with him on the field of battle. We never confront a dead body with him. He presents us with what his first sight of a corpse called forth: childhood memories of the dead dog his sister and he came across on a walk and of the make-believe funeral rites they enacted. Even children know you bury dead people, Graves's poem tells us. It is a time-honored custom we have known since the last line of the *Iliad* (24.804) was written:

> Thus they conducted the funeral rites of horse-taming Hector.

Fall Semester 2012

1. Robert Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry,* ed. Paul O'Prey (Manchester, 1995), p. 79.
2. David Roberts, *Minds at War: The Poetry and Experience of the First World War* (Burgess Hill, West Sussex, 1996) p. 11.
3. Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (New York, 2010), pp. 2–3.
4. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975), p. 208.
5. Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry,* p. 467.
6. William D. Broyles, Jr., "Why Men Love War," *Esquire,* Nov. 1984, p. 61.
7. Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry,* p. 6.
8. Bruce King, *Robert Graves: A Biography* (London, 2009), pp. 17–19.
9. Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (2nd edn., New York, 1957), pp. 41, 13.
10. Robert Graves, *Collected Poems, 1938–1945* (New York, 1946).
11. Randall Jarrell, *Third Book of Criticism* (New York, 1969), p. 78.
12. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York, 1985), p. 331.
13. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York, 1998), pp. 68–69.
14. Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory,* p. 85.
15. Studs Terkel, *The Good War* (New York, 1985), p. 5.

Nursery Memories

BY ROBERT GRAVES

I. – *THE FIRST FUNERAL*

(The first corpse I saw was on the
German wires, and couldn't be buried)

The whole field was so smelly;
  We smelt the poor dog first:
His horrid swollen belly
  Looked just like going burst.

His fur was most untidy;
  He hadn't any eyes.
It happened on Good Friday
  And there was lots of flies.

And then I felt the coldest
  I'd ever felt, and sick,
But Rose, 'cause she's the oldest,
  Dared poke him with her stick.

He felt quite soft and horrid:
  The flies buzzed round his head
And settled on his forehead:
  Rose whispered: 'That dog's dead.

'You bury all dead people,
  When they're quite really dead,
Round churches with a steeple:
  Let's bury this,' Rose said.

'And let's put mint all round it
  To hide the nasty smell.'
I went to look and found it—
  Lots, growing near the well.

We poked him through the clover
  Into a hole, and then
We threw brown earth right over
  And said: 'Poor dog, Amen!'

Dulce et Decorum Est

BY WILFRED OWEN

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

NOTES: Latin phrase is from the Roman poet Horace: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

Source: *Poems* (Viking Press, 1921)