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# Neurasthenia, Robert Graves, and Poetic Therapy in the Great War

## Abstract

Though Robert Graves is remembered primarily for his memoir, *Good-bye to All That*, his First World War poetry is equally relevant. Comparably to the more famous writings of Sassoon and Owen, Graves' war poems depict the trauma of the trenches, marked by his repressed neurasthenia (colloquially, shell-shock), and foreshadow his later remarkable poetic talents.

## Keywords

Robert Graves, poetry, great war, World War I, shell-shock

## Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | Literature in English, British Isles | Military History

## Comments

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## Neurasthenia, Robert Graves, and Poetic Therapy in the Great War

Juliette Sebock

By 1914, hysterical disorders were easily recognisable, in both civilian and military life. In the latter context, what had historically been seen as a woman's disease became masculinised, accompanied by new terms such as 'soldier's heart,' 'neurosis,' and 'hysterical sympathy with the enemy.'<sup>1</sup> While 'shell shock' is formally recognised as a diagnosis of its own, it has come to encompass most forms of war neurosis through the historiography thereof, including neurasthenia, a variation most common in officers. While often compared to modern-day Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), its symptoms were distinct despite overlap, including tics, tremor, fatigue, headache, nightmares, and memory loss.<sup>2</sup>

These conditions, often mistaken by the unaffected as cowardice, were given many possible causes, including 'unmanly fear' and higher levels of education on the part of upper-class servicemen, thought to contribute to the 6% disparity between the 10% of affected officers and 4% enlisted men (realistically, the more significant stress placed on officers is a more likely factor).<sup>3</sup> The ever-growing industrial aspects of warfare also contributed: the dehumanisation of the enemy caused by the increase in machines blurred the line between life and death, creating an understandably disorienting effect.<sup>4</sup> As Samuel Hynes describes, 'Men broke down in combat, in this war, because their lives had not prepared them to face danger, because they were *civilians*.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 163.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Jones, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 193.

<sup>3</sup> Ragul Ganesh, Siddharth Sarkar, and Rajesh Sagar, "'Shell Shock': An Entity that Predated Combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Mental Health and Human Behaviours* 20, no. 2 (2015): 85.

<sup>4</sup> Leed, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 63.

'Civilianness' made new soldiers all the less prepared for battle, simply because there was nothing to which they could compare it, much less adequately prepare.

Formally, classifications of these disorders were categorised as shell shock, which was 'caused by explosive shock to the central nervous system,' hysteria, neurasthenia, the equivalent to later battle fatigue, 'caused by prolonged intense physical or mental stress,' or disordered action of the heart (DAH).<sup>6</sup> Psychological reactions to the traumas of war were rampant; as Ragul Ganesh et al. state, 'By the end of the first world war, approximately 80,000 British soldiers had been diagnosed with shell shock.'<sup>7</sup> Neurasthenia, more specifically, was given an equally wide variety of potential causes, most notably triggering by traumatic events. Martin Seymour-Smith describes neurasthenia thus:

After the First World War the term 'neurasthenia' was used vaguely, as a synonym for 'war neurosis'. But the neurosis was not caused by war experience, but relentlessly uncovered by it. Men found themselves stripped of their necessary psychological defences; they found themselves having, at a too early age, to face aspects of themselves of which they were ignorant, and which therefore terrified them.<sup>8</sup>

Doctors were faced with an inherent dilemma in these diagnoses. While these classifications existed, they were not widely understood nor accepted as such. Debates raged as to whether 'traumatic hysteria' cases were eligible for pension as wounded and these conditions differences from their civilian equivalents. Without a visible, physical wound, the afflicteds' reactions appeared unexplainable beyond simple cowardice.

Higher-ups within the military itself saw the classification of neuroses as a political issue: 'to allow neurosis the privilege of "disease" would open a gaping hole in the structures of

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<sup>6</sup> Suzie Grogan, *Shell Shocked Britain: The First World War's Legacy for Britain's Mental Health* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History, 2014), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ganesh et al., 86.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 76.

discipline that kept soldiers in the war.<sup>9</sup> Despite indecision as to the formal status, doctors remained tasked with treating these neuroses and did so with treatments ranging from hypnosis and free association to colour therapy. With thousands of wounded, though, many soldiers affected by forms of war neurosis resorted to self-help methods, including swimming.<sup>10</sup> One of these 'self-help' style treatments was, of course, writing, which was utilised by many traumatised by the war, whether formally diagnosed with neuroses or not, including poet Robert Graves.

Graves was born in 1895 to Alfred Perceval Graves, a poet himself, and Amalie von Ranke. He attended Charterhouse public school, where he began writing poetry. In 1914, he accepted a commission with the Royal Welch Fusiliers just two days after the declaration of war, seeing enlistment as 'his duty as a gentleman.'<sup>11</sup> Graves's war experience reached the height of physical trauma at the Somme, where he was injured to the point of being reported dead. Six months later, he was back at the front before suffering a nervous breakdown and returning to England with bronchitis.

While Graves is best known for his memoir, *Good-bye to All That*, he saw himself primarily as a poet. Frank Kersnowski states that he 'was never a war poet, but a poet who wrote about war.'<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the war had an impact on his writing as much as it did his psyche. He released three poetry collections during his service: *Over the Brazier* (1916), *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), and *Goliath and David*, a private publication printed in 1916. Literary analysts have questioned the poetic value of these works, particularly in comparison to his later, more

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<sup>9</sup> Leed, 166.

<sup>10</sup> Grogan, 58.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Andrew Isherwood, *Remembering the Great War: Writing and Publishing the Experiences of World War I* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017), 117.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Kersnowski, *Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 34.

mature poems. More broadly, poetry written in the trenches has been historically disregarded as being too highly influenced by the moment at hand, rather than given the meditation and revision that marks high-quality poetry (Graves himself would write upwards of 30 drafts per poem in his later works). Graves himself was notorious for withholding previously published pieces in later collections; as he reveals in the forward to his *Collected Poems: 1955*, in each of his four collections he 'suppressed anything in previous volumes that no longer satisfied [him].'<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Graves's trench poetry holds both historical and literary value. More than a century before the great war, William Wordsworth wrote in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that '[. . .] all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.'<sup>14</sup> By writing in the moment, Graves serves as a prime example of the sudden surge of powerful emotion that leads one to write equally powerful poetry.

While many poets of the first world war are largely recognised for the influence of shell shock on their work, Graves has not been extensively examined in this context. This is due, in part, to his own avoidance thereof. Reading the revised edition of *Good-bye to All That*, his references to neurasthenia are limited, even more so to his own. In the 1929 edition, however, this was different:

I had few reminders [of my illness] except my yearly visit to the standing medical board. The board continued for some years to recommend me for a disability pension. The particular disability was neurasthenia; the train journey and the army railway-warrant filled out with my rank and regiment usually produced reminiscient neurasthenia by the time I reached the board.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Graves, *Collected Poems: 1955* (Garden City: Country Life Press, 1955), xi.

<sup>14</sup> R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2005), 291.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, "Good-bye to All That," *Archive*, [https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.209039/2015.209039.Good-bye-To\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.209039/2015.209039.Good-bye-To_djvu.txt).

This refers, of course, to his memory of his journey to Oxford following his most significant war injury—that which had him declared dead. In later editions of the memoir, a significant portion of this chapter is removed, most notably these references to Graves's neurasthenia. John Woodrow Presley puts Graves's perspective aptly: 'Graves was a "neurasthenic," but with a difference: he pretended (after 1925) that he was not.'<sup>16</sup>

When asked about wanting to explain his experiences to those on the home front, Graves himself stated 'You couldn't: you can't communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment—ever.'<sup>17</sup> Yet, his poems bring readers closer to the front than direct description can. And, regardless of how strongly one considers the influence of his neurasthenia, the trauma of his war experience is as blatant in his poetry as it is in *Good-bye to All That*. While neurasthenia specifically is present in his later works, post- 'shell shock,' the traumatic experience of war, naturally, exists across these post-enlistment writings.

In *Over the Brazier's 'It's a Queer Time,'* Graves depicts the reaction of these new servicemen to the front. However, as Bernard Bergonzi contextualises, the poem was written in anticipation of battle, several weeks before he arrived. Nevertheless, he has much to contend with.<sup>18</sup> Here, Graves is truly epitomising Wordsworth's idea of the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling; in fact, much of the included poems were written in the pages of a Keats book given to Graves by his father.<sup>19</sup> Though paper could be scarce for periods in the trenches, the motivation to write was overwhelming to the point of scribbling it in the margins.

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<sup>16</sup> John Woodrow Presley, "Neurasthenia and the Cure of Literature: Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Andy Collins," *JAC* 30, no. ½ (2010), 272.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1975), 170.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1965), 66.

<sup>19</sup> Kersnowski, 31.

Bergonzi describes the poem's titular refrain as 'willing understatement,

an apt explanation. The piece begins explicitly references the battlefield setting: 'It's hard to know if you're alive or dead / When steel and fire go roaring through your head.' His phrasing throughout is striking, particularly the dichotomy he presents between relative normalcy and "struggling, gasping, struggling." The understatement reappears out of the refrain, such as "things happen much too quick."<sup>20</sup> By understating the unquestionable horrors of the speaker's situation, Graves emphasises it. The piece becomes jarring, placing his simple statement beside the shells and terrors of war.

Graves's use of children and childhood is present throughout his career, but perhaps the most blatant examples are in *Fairies and Fusiliers*; the title alone sets up the binary between child and soldier, innocence and battle. This analogy is brought out more deeply in specific poems, including 'A Child's Nightmare,' which references a childhood nightmare and the recollection of this nightmare in the moment of trauma. Here, it is important to acknowledge that the poetic 'I' is not explicitly interchangeable with the poet himself. In reference to this poem, in particular, Graves would later reveal its origin in the form of a case study in *Poetic Unreason*, a third-person account.<sup>21</sup> Given Graves's editing out of his traumatic responses over time, it is not unlikely that he changed this as well. Even accepting his claim at face value, the mere act of writing the poem requires a level of meditation on the situation.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Graves, "Over the Brazier," *Archive*, [https://archive.org/stream/overbrazier00gravrich/overbrazier00gravrich\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/overbrazier00gravrich/overbrazier00gravrich_djvu.txt).

<sup>21</sup> Kersnowski, 45.



In the poem, the speaker first describes the nightmare he suffered as a child of an entity with feline qualities. In the second half of the piece, the entity reappears on the train following the speaker's wounding,

[leaping] on me again / From the clank of a night train, / Overpowered me foot and head,  
/ Lapped my blood, while on and on / The old voice cruel and flat / Says for ever, 'Cat!  
... Cat! ... Cat! ...'<sup>22</sup>

The train ride, of course, is incredibly similar to Graves's experience, which left him traumatised by trains for years. However, the most notable feature for the reader in trying to understand the situation within the poem is its analogy. To the speaker, the trauma of the situation is unfathomable, even less to the distant reader. The natural response to trying to understand is to compare his experience to something understandable: in this case, the terror of a childhood fear. As a child experiencing this nightmare, the speaker was powerless; similarly, the speaker is rendered powerless by his wounding and the battle at large.

Kersnowski describes *Goliath and David* as 'an edition of about two hundred copies which were not for sale,' potentially published just prior to *Over the Brazier*, though Graves listed the latter as his first collection. Regardless, the poems in *Goliath and David* were written after those in *Over the Brazier*, therefore closer to his neurasthenia. Though copies of the publication itself were limited, some poems were reprinted and can be accessed with relative ease.

In 'Escape,' Graves refers directly to his wounding, and, as one can expect in his constant revision, was not republished any later than *Poems (1914–1927)*. Graves here focuses on sound, the same noise he referred to in relation to the incommunicability of his experience, as well as

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<sup>22</sup> Graves, "A Child's Nightmare," *Fairies and Fusiliers*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918, 74.

the lens of myth that would mark much of his later writing. Conversely, he focuses also on the physical immediately at hand, most notably the influence of morphine, 'the all-power poppy'<sup>23</sup> that aids his titular escape. This is a far more familiar image than the horrors of battle, so, like the understatement in 'It's a Queer Time' and the analogy in 'A Child's Nightmare,' the frame of reference provided by myth, familiar to his fellow officers and much of his audience, and by the familiarity of morphine ground the poem in reality.

Admittedly, Grave's trench poetry is of a lower literary standard than his later works, evidenced blatantly by his basic couplet rhyme scheme (a primary facet of the more-recognised war poems are the near rhymes or consonance rhymes that mark them as literary. Despite critics' hesitance to focus analysis on Graves poetry and his own self-criticisms thereof, his poetry nevertheless does an excellent job both of marking his early literary talent and depicting his war experiences. The same lack of communicability that marks his neurasthenia, and the trauma of his war experience at large, is arguably the biggest strength of his poetry in these instances. By forcing him to create analogies to the familiar, whether a strange situation, a childhood fear, or a common drug, Graves's poems become all the more relatable to the reader. And while neuroses, including shell-shock and neurasthenia, were difficult to understand at the time and continue to be misunderstood historically, the personal examples put forth in 'It's a Queer Time,' 'A Child's Nightmare,' and 'Escape' make them all the more clear.

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<sup>23</sup> Graves, "Escape," *Fairies and Fusiliers*, 76.

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