

Great WWI-era Austrian Writers: Musil, Zweig, Roth

During this ongoing centenary of the First World War, I became more interested in the details of [the Italian front](#) in that war, a campaign not generally well-known to Anglophones like me. It did not take me long to realize that I was also quite ignorant, historically speaking, of their opponent—the Austrian-Hungarian empire. A friend recommended Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* as a very philosophical novel that I would appreciate. From there I discovered Joseph Roth's *Radetzky March* and other novels, and Stefan Zweig's varied fiction and his memoir, *The World of Yesterday*.

All three writers, Musil (1880-1942), Zweig (1881-1942), and Roth (1894-1939), share many similarities. The first thing is that they were all exact contemporaries. They were all born and came of age at the height of fin de siècle Viennese culture. They were all outsiders in that society to some extent. Zweig and Roth were both secular Jews, and Musil's wife was Jewish. All three had books burned, and were ultimately destroyed themselves by the Nazis. Like almost everyone, they were affected by the First World War, and dedicated most of their authorial attention to describing Austrian society before and after the war. All three were preoccupied by suicide, a prevalent theme in Viennese culture then. They were dedicated to literature and the arts, and despite different styles, I believe them to be among the greatest writers of the first half of the century in any language.

When I realized that Musil's magnum opus *The Man Without Qualities* was over 1000 pages, I decided to approach him via a more accessible route. His early novel *The Confusions of Young Törless* is also critically acclaimed, and I immediately understood why. Published in 1906, *Törless* is a Bildungsroman

about young boys in an all-male military boarding school, mirroring Musil's own early experience. It is both disturbing and fascinating how Musil probes the psychology and motivations of the three main characters in forming a sort of triumvirate of power over the other boys in the class. This early novel also vaguely foreshadows the latent cruelty and bigotry combined with Germanic militarism that would devolve into the future Nazi state.

The Man Without Qualities (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*) was Musil's ongoing project from the early 1920s until his death in 1942. It is very openly a "novel of ideas," somewhere between *The Brothers Karamozov* and *The Magic Mountain*. It is easily one of the greatest works of high Modernist fiction, somewhere between *Ulysses* and *In Search of Lost Time*. Though unfinished, its three volumes run to over 1700 pages in some editions, and around 1100 for the English translation. The unusual title refers to the protagonist Ulrich, a young mathematician who is searching for something like a meaning and morality to combat his seeming indifference to life and his place in bourgeois society. There are several other unforgettable main characters: especially Diotima, a cultural muse for Viennese society who held philosophical salons, and her would-be lover Arnheim, a wealthy Prussian businessman who also writes popular books of essays and rivals Ulrich's intelligence. A character named Moosbrugger, a hulking laborer who murders a prostitute, provides an ongoing digression and topic of moral and legal interest for Ulrich.

As Musil had already demonstrated in an earlier volume of tales called *Five Women*, he had a particular talent for creating rich and interesting female characters, especially compared to other male writers from his time. In addition to Diotima, there is Clarisse, a more intellectual Holly Golightly-type, Bonadea, Ulrich's bored housewife lover, and Agathe, his mysterious sister that appears only in the last part of the novel.

It seems like Musil's ambition and his intellect were almost too much to be contained in this single sweeping novel. As a novelist, he seems too big for his time. *The Man Without Qualities*, written in the 1930s during the slow buildup to a bigger war, is set in the period just before the First World War. The main plot deals with the so-called Parallel Campaign, a military-like campaign to plan and execute a national celebration for the 70th year (!) of Emperor Franz Joseph's reign which would occur in 1918 (the reader knows this never occurred, as he died in the middle of the war). There were never any specific proposals drawn up, but it was to be a earth-shaking event of cultural and political importance that would remind the world of the centrality of the Austrian nation. It would also, by definition, compete against and surpass the simultaneous Prussian celebration of Kaiser Wilhelm's 30th year of rule. Ulrich was named as the secretary to the Parallel Campaign's director, and all the meetings were held in Diotima's salon. The fact that this event was founded in such a cultural and philosophical milieu is at odds with the real history of the upcoming war that Musil, and the reader, are all too aware of. The best way to describe *The Man Without Qualities* would be combining a satire of Austrian pre-war society with lyrical philosophical musings.

The novel itself is modernist in the sense that it is ironically self-aware and metafictional. It has chapter titles like Chapter One: "From which, remarkably enough, nothing develops." While the strength of the characters and the ideas are enough to propel the narrative for quite a while, it is true that the main plot increasingly feels bogged down by inertia as the pages multiply. At the same time, this fact itself, even considering that the book remained unfinished at Musil's death, feels almost intended. One gets the sense that this novel contains Musil's expression of despair over the First World War and all that was lost as well as a sense of the coming disaster of the next war. It feels as if this novel is Musil's alternate reality for an Austria and Europe that

never fell into destructive war, while also satirizing the petty faults of the society that vanished in that war to be replaced by greater crimes and less humanity.

The last part of the novel is also the most inchoate and dreamlike, wherein Ulrich rediscovers his alienated younger sister in their family house away from Vienna. The pair regress into some sort of fantasy world while most of the plot and the world around them seems to gradually disappear. Even with its faults and difficulties, *The Man Without Qualities* is and will remain a book for serious readers and thinkers for all time.

Joseph Roth's masterpiece is the 1932 novel *Radetsky March*, which follows the gradual decline of the Austrian Empire from 1859 until World War One. If Musil's work is comparable to modernist writers like Proust, Roth's novel is nothing less than a shorter and more ironic version of *War and Peace*. It follows three generations of the von Trotta family from the disastrous Battle of Solferino, which forced Austria to give up much of its Italian territory, to the middle of the Great War. It follows various characters, from servants to the Emperor himself, who is depicted with an empty brain and a constantly dripping nose. At the aforementioned battle, the founder of the von Trotta "dynasty" was a Slovenian lieutenant who stepped in front of an Italian bullet destined to kill the young Franz Joseph. He survived and was ennobled by the grateful emperor, who thereafter followed his savior's career closely. The event became enshrined in legend and magnified in children's schoolbooks, so that the elder von Trotta became the famous "Hero of Solferino." This hero was so uncomfortable that he prohibited his own son from entering the military, and eventually called upon the Emperor himself to denounce the embellished version of the event.

The Battle of Solferino, though little known today, was one of the biggest and most important battles in Europe in the century between Napoleon and WWI. It was the last battle in

history where the armies were all under the command of their respective monarchs (Napoleon III, Vittorio Emanuele II, and Franz Joseph). It was so bloody that it led directly to the founding of the Red Cross and the establishment of the Geneva Conventions for armed conflicts. It was a disaster for Austria, which was forced to give up its richest Italian province, Lombardy. It was the first big loss for Austria in a series of setbacks that continued unabated until the Empire was disbanded following WWI, just after the end of Franz Joseph's 66-year reign. The symbolism of starting the novel with the Battle of Solferino is thus appropriate foreshadowing of the bigger tragedies to come, written as it was a over a decade after WWI of hardship and poverty for the new rump state of Austria.

The opening lines of the novel set a powerful and elegiac tone for the lost past and lost future of Austria and Europe, as seen from the early thirties:

"BACK THEN, BEFORE the Great War, when the incidents reported on these pages took place, it was not yet a matter of indifference whether a person lived or died. If a life was snuffed out from the host of the living, another life did not instantly replace it and make people forget the deceased. Instead, a gap remained where he had been, and both the near and distant witnesses of his demise fell silent whenever they saw this gap. If a fire devoured a house in a row of houses in a street, the charred site remained empty for a long time. For the bricklayers worked slowly and leisurely, and when the closest neighbors as well as casual passersby looked at the empty lot, they remembered the shape and the walls of the vanished house. That was how things were back then. Anything that grew took its time growing, and anything that perished took a long time to be forgotten. But everything that had once existed left its traces, and people lived on memories just as they now live on the ability to forget quickly and emphatically."

Roth wrote a sequel to *Radetsky March* called *The Emperor's Tomb* in 1938, the year before his death. It is curiously different in tone and style from the earlier novel; the high realism and irony is replaced with a more comical cynicism and looser narrative structure. It follows a character from another branch of the von Trotta family, and a Polish character related to a wealthy count in the earlier novel; otherwise there is no internal reference or connection between the two novels. *The Emperor's Tomb* is set in Vienna after the end of the war, where inflation, depression, and growing extremism now reign in place of the defunct emperor.

Roth's first novel was 1924's *Hotel Savoy*, set in the real and still existing namesake hotel in Łódź, Poland. The hotel serves as a way point and meeting place for soldiers making their way home from the eastern front after the war, along with a variety of other richly drawn character types. It is an almost journalistic account of the broken dreams but still abundant hope people had after the recent war. Here is a taste of the type of muscular melancholic prose Roth employs in this early novel:

"Things were going badly with these people. They prepared their own destiny and yet believed that it came from God. They were prisoners of tradition, their hearts hung by a thousand threads and the threads were spun by their own hands. Along all the ways of their lives stood the thou shalt not of their god, their police, their kings, their position. In this direction they could go no further, and in that place they could stay no longer. And so, after a couple of decades during which they had struggled, made mistakes and not known which way to turn, they died in their beds and bequeathed their wretchedness to their descendants."

Roth cranked out many short novels very quickly in order to make a living during his unhappy years of exile and alcoholism. None of these reach the greatness of *Radetsky March*, but the best of them is, I think, *Job*. It is a sort of

morality tale of the Galician Shtetl Jewish community that Roth grew up, in which a desperately poor family reclaims a lost son in America. He deals with his Jewish roots in other books such as *Leviathan*, *The Silent Prophet*, and *The Wandering Jews*. *The Antichrist* is a sort of novelistic *cri de coeur* against the wave of violence and anti-Semitism in his native land, where his books went up in flames. He drank himself to death in Paris the year after the Anschluss, and a few months before the beginning of the new war he had long seen coming.

Stefan Zweig was a prolific writer and cultural figure in the three decades leading up to his death in 1942. His books were popular and best-selling throughout the 1920s and early 30s not only in the German world, but in Europe and the Americas. He grew up in a wealthy, non-religious Jewish family in Vienna. He wanted to be a writer since childhood, and published continuously in a variety of genres from age 19 to his death at 60. His fiction mostly consists of short stories and novellas, and only two full-length novels (one of which, *The Post-Office Girl*, was unfinished and published posthumously). He also wrote popular biographical and historical works, many of which celebrate his literary idols and influences, such as Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Rolland, Verlaine, and Nietzsche. Others include figures such as Marie Antoinette, Mary Stuart, Erasmus, and Magellan. He also wrote a few plays, plenty of journalistic articles, and a well-known autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*.

Zweig was a good friend and admirer of Freud, and that influence shows up constantly in his work. His fiction, but also his biography, is very focused on the psychological motivations of the characters. In a great number of his stories and novellas, the main events turn upon the obsessive and sometimes destructive personal and sexual relationships between characters. This was something not commonly found in literature of the time; Zweig, like Musil, was thus on the cutting edge of psychological writing of the 20th century. His

works are the most accessible and entertaining of the three writers I have discussed. His style was fast-paced and full of surprise developments. His novel *Beward of Pity*, for example, is a real page-turner. Most of Zweig's work is so short because his editing style was to cut as much as possible until only what he considered essential to moving the story forward remained (something that could have served Musil well). In addition, his stories are particularly rich in complicated frame narratives in the form of second-hand narrators, discovered letters, etc., which is an old literary technique that is difficult to pull off convincingly and often outgrows its welcome; nevertheless, Zweig somehow seems to enrich his fiction each time he uses this technique.

One of Zweig's best stories, in my opinion, is "Mendel the Bibliophile". It tells of an old Jewish book merchant who sits in the same cafe all day everyday and has a flawless encyclopedic memory of every page of every edition of every book, or at least every book that has moved through Vienna or Central Europe. He is taken away to a concentration camp when WWI starts, and when he returns years later, everything is changed and hostile. It is a rich and sad tale that, like much of Zweig's work, is evocative of the rich cultural and intellectual life of pre-war Vienna, and laments the destruction of that world by the war. The title and theme of the book also prefigure later stories by Jorge Luis Borges, who had no doubt read Zweig (who was one of the main delegates at the 1936 PEN conference in Borges' home of Buenos Aires).

Another of my favorites is the 1941 novella *Chess Story*, the last fictional work Zweig finished and published before his death. It tells of two incredible and highly unconventional chess masters who meet on a transatlantic ocean liner en route to South America. It is revealed that one of the men was imprisoned and psychologically tortured by the Nazi regime, but was eventually able to steal a small book from a guard's coat that turned out to be a chess manual. Like most of

Zweig's work, it is insightful and sensitive to the vicissitudes of human suffering and success. In his novel *Beware of Pity*, the narrator says something which I think applies to the author himself: "Once you have gained some understanding of human nature, further understanding of it seems to grow mysteriously, and when you are able to feel genuine sympathy for a single form of earthly suffering, the magic of that lesson enables you to understand all others, however strange and apparently absurd they may be."

Zweig is well-known also for his memoirs *The World of Yesterday*. The writer, typically focused on minor transformative episodes in his character's lives rather than big political issues, revealed the depth of pain he felt by the senseless violence of the First World War which shattered the Viennese culture he knew and loved as well as his vision of a unified, cosmopolitan, peaceful pan-European culture. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in learning more about pre- and post-war Austrian society, but it is also one of the most distinctive memoirs I have read in general. After he sent it to his publisher, Stefan Zweig and his wife killed themselves in their new home in Brazil, in despair of the seemingly unstoppable Nazi advance and what it would bring.

All three of these writers were, as I have said, hugely important writers in Austrian culture, but were also enemies of the culture and society that developed between the two wars. In addition to the millions slaughtered in vain in that infinite human folly known as World War One, these three writers were among the tens of millions who were gradually broken by the suffering brought about due to the first war and leading up to the next war. Although Austrians, and, from the Allied perspective, on the "enemy" side, these three writers, like all artists, transcended their national birthright by means of the universal and timeless art they produced. I have profited and enjoying reading all of them much more than any

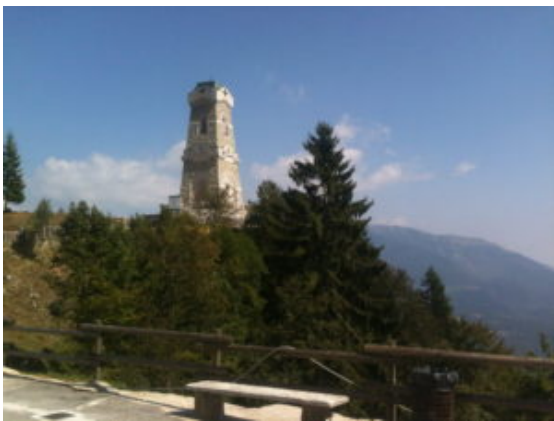
mere history of the wars they abhorred.

Extra author postscript: Gregor von Rezzori, born in 1914 and therefore of a different generation entirely, wrote some books which provide an fascinating commentary on and supplement to the works I have mentioned above. His provocatively titled *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite* is not actually his memoirs but a novel, even if closely based on the circumstances of the author's life. It recounts various minor episodes showing the paradoxes and inconsistencies within the antisemitic family and society the main character was raised in. His actual memoirs, *The Snows of Yesteryear*, is reminiscent in tone and title to Zweig's memoirs. He tells of his life growing up in an old Austrian noble family that found itself outcast and culturally stateless in the eastern mountains of a newly independent Romania. The prose is rich and evocative of the same lost world recounted by Zweig, but it also reminds me of the Central European milieu Patrick Fermor encountered and described in *A Time of Gifts*. Rezzori spent the entirety of World War Two living as a civilian in Germany; though he was a military-aged male, his Romanian citizenship prevented him from being sent to the front, luckily for him and for us. He is well-worth reading for those looking for more writers from the extinct land of the Habsburg emperors, like Musil, Roth, and Zweig.

The Italian Front in WWI: Bad Tactics, Worse Leadership,

and Pointless Sacrifice

During this ongoing centenary of the First World War, interest in “The War to End All Wars” has returned, especially in the form of articles and essays. In the English-speaking world, this is almost always focused on the Western Front and the battles featuring Britain or the USA (I contributed to this phenomenon with my essay discussing Robert Graves, [Goodbye to Christmas Truces](#)). The contributions of nations on other fronts are largely forgotten in this context. How many people even know which side Romania or Bulgaria fought on, or where Galicia is? The Italian Front is also largely unknown in the Anglosphere, except perhaps to note that it is the setting for Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. After reading Mark Thompson’s *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919* (Basic Books, 2010), I learned a great deal about this important historical chapter, and strongly recommend this book to all readers of history.



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I have lived in Italy for 10 years, during which time my passion for history and mountains has served me well. I have hiked up dozens of alpine peaks still crisscrossed with trenches, tunnels, and artillery positions. The World War I

front is ubiquitous in northeast Italy, stretching over 400 miles across the Dolomites and Julian Alps from Lake Garda to the Isonzo River in Slovenia. When I was in the U.S. Army I participated in a battalion staff ride to the Asiago plateau north of Vicenza to study the battlefield. As an artillery officer myself I was responsible for researching and giving a presentation to the group about the nature of indirect fire during the war. There are many enormous, Fascist-era war memorials and charnel-houses along the front holding the mortal remains of tens of thousands or more of fallen soldiers. I have visited these monumental tombs at Asiago, Pasubio, Monte Grappa, and Caporetto several times each, and it is always a sobering experience. Every town in Italy displays a plaque in the public square with the names of those native sons who died in the wars, a dozen or less in the case of the smallest villages. Unlike America, which has not seen war on its own soil since the 1860s, the memories of the two world wars live on in a much more profound way in Italy and all the [countries of Europe](#). In Italy's case, the ostensible "victory" of the First World War made it the source of a continuing myth of heroism. Here's the truth: Italy's participation and conduct in that war was a total disaster that led directly to its two decades of Fascist rule, and subsequent defeat in the next world war.

Bad Tactics

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One notable recent exception to the general lack of English-language recognition of the Italian front is this [fantastic journalism](#) by Brian Mockenhaupt in Smithsonian Magazine. In this article the author mainly discusses the extreme winter hardships of the high mountain fighting in the Dolomites and the feats of engineering by both the Italians and Austrians. Despite repeated offensives, almost all by the Italian side, the front throughout the war stayed remarkably stable in something resembling an even more inept version of the trench warfare of the Western Front. The two main sectors were the high mountainous border between the Trentino and Veneto, especially around the Asiago plateau down to Monte Grappa, and the line of the Isonzo (now Soča) River which nearly aligns with the current border of Italy and Slovenia and is characterized by a plateau called the Carso. The first sector is rightly famous for the unprecedented extremes I mentioned before. Indeed, Mark Thompson says in *The White War*: “The mountain units had to endure fantastically severe conditions. War had never been fought at such heights before, up to 3,500 metres. Fighting in the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and more

recently in Kashmir occurred at even greater altitudes, but the soldiers' experience on the Alpine front remains unmatched." As for the feats of engineering, this was probably the single strong point of the Italian war effort from 1915-1918, and one has left traces all over the mountains today from the 52 tunnels carved up into Mt. Pasubio, to the cable cars, *vie ferrate*, trenches, and explosive mining under enemy positions. Otherwise, both sectors of the front still suffered from the same massive errors of strategic and tactical planning and execution that doomed both belligerent sides to such a brutal and dismal struggle.



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reen waters of the Soča (Isonzo) as it flows peacefully today through a verdant valley near Kobarid (Caporetto)

For anyone who has never been in close proximity to artillery shells landing or machine-guns firing, it is hard to imagine the destruction these modern weapons can cause on unsuspecting or unprepared human beings. Imagine men moving up exposed and difficult terrain into unbreachable barbed wire entanglements, then you will have an idea of the fundamental tactical problem of World War One that led to the stalemate of trench warfare. On the Isonzo Front, the Italians fought 12 large battles along the exact same lines over the course of over two years, involving over a couple million soldiers, a million

casualties, and absolutely no change of tactics to face the artillery, machine-guns, and barbed wire. The Austro-Hungarians defended this front extremely well for over two years, very undermanned and under-equipped, giving up very little territory, and inflicting more casualties on their enemy than they received most of the time. In *The White War*, Thompson writes: "The Italians kept coming, wave after wave, across open ground in close-order formation, shoulder to shoulder, against field guns and machine guns. To one Austrian artillery officer, 'it looked like an attempt at mass suicide'. Those who reached the deserted Austrian line met flame-throwers, tear gas, and machine-gun and rifle fire emanating from hollows and outcrops on the crumpled Carso. When dusk fell, their only significant gain was a hilltop, wrested from the Polish infantry of the 16th Division."

The 12th Battle of the Isonzo of October 1917, often called the Battle of Caporetto, was the first and only offensive by the Austrians on this front during the war. It was also a massive and unexpected defeat for the Italians that took back a part of the territory ceded to Italy in 1866 and nearly succeeded in forcing Italy to sue for a separate peace treaty. Superior German forces participated and led the way in this victory, including a vanguard company led by a young Lieutenant Erwin Rommel whose initiative caught much larger Italian forces unawares and helped break the poorly defended Italian lines west of the Isonzo. Thompson writes: "Caporetto was the outcome when innovative tactics were expertly used against an army that was, in doctrine and organization, one of the most hidebound in Europe. The Twelfth Battle was a Blitzkrieg before the concept existed."

The disaster of Caporetto for the Italians led to the long overdue replacement of the inept Supreme Commander Luigi Cadorna, and the consolidation of Italian forces along a much more compact and well-defended line of the Piave River north of Venice. This allowed the Italians to bide their time and

build up forces for one last offensive against the by-then completely exhausted and hopeless Austrians. This last battle, with the auspicious name of Vittorio Veneto, supposedly washed away forever the stain of Caporetto and the Isonzo (which seem to have been traumatically erased from Italian memory immediately after the war).

Even for someone who spent two years in combat and is well-versed in military history, the stupidity and callousness of the Italian generals is enraging. Sending millions of courageous young men into uphill attacks without effective artillery backup, aerial support, intelligence, or even wire-cutters for the barbed wire is a way to earn the absolute contempt of your own soldiers, as well as the enemy, as well as posterity. Thompson described the front in this way: "Italian losses were increased by sheer carelessness, born of inexperience and also ideology. Many officers disdained to organize their defenses properly because they thought the Austrians did not deserve the compliment. Only tragic experience would expunge this prejudice."

And again here: "The troops were unprepared, in every sense, for the conditions they faced. Lacking weapons, ordered to attack barbed wire, struck down by typhoid and cholera, poorly clothed and fed, sleeping on wet hay or mud, the men began to realize that they were 'going to be massacred, not to fight'. Hardly Garibaldian warriors, rather cannon fodder in a new kind of war."

On the living conditions at the front that never improved in nearly three years: "Sweat, dust, mud, rain and sun turned the men's woolen uniforms into something like parchment. Their boots often had cardboard uppers and wooden soles. Lacking better remedies, the men rubbed tallow into their cracked feet. Helmets were in very short supply. The wooden water bottles were unhygienic. The tents – when they had them – leaked. The wire-cutters were almost useless, and unusable under fire: 'mere garden secateurs', as a Sardinian officer

wrote disgustedly in his diary. Ration parties were often delayed by enemy fire. The only hot meal was in the morning, and so poor that soldiers often rejected most of it. The pervasive stench could, anyway, make eating impossible. The effects of such poor nutrition were evident after three or four days in the trenches, and some units sent out raiding parties for food and clothing in trenches that the enemy had abandoned. The soldiers slept on straw pallets, but there were not enough to go around. Even in the rear, before proper hutments were built, the men lived in tents that quickly became waterlogged and filthy. Abysmal medical care led to 'a good number of avoidable deaths due to inhuman treatment'. Wounded men were routinely 'shipped on 20 or 30 km ambulance runs on vile roads and then kept waiting for hours outside hospital'."

Worse Leadership

How did things get so miserable for the Italian side? The answer is an utter lack of political and military leadership. The only person of leadership during this war who comes out well in reading *The White War* is General Armando Diaz, who replaced Luigi Cadorna after Caporetto and injected basic competence and caution into the war. I cannot recall in any historical period a supreme commander who combined such unchallenged authority and staying power with such complete incompetence. In any other situation, a leader such as Cadorna would have been quickly killed, replaced, or forced into surrender. The less said about this character, who somehow still has streets named after him in Italy, the better.

Luigi Cadorna



I'll leave him with two succinct descriptions from Thompson's book: "Worst of all, Cadorna had discovered a knack for abandoning offensives when Borojević [the very capable Croatian general of the Austrian Isonzo forces] had committed his last reserves. The steely exterior concealed a vacillating spirit."

"Cadorna's and Capello's [another inept general] actions in the Eleventh Battle were so careless and self-destructive that historians have struggled to account for them. In truth, the two men acted fully in character. Cadorna's battle plans always tended to incoherence, his command often slackened fatally in the course of offensives."

The other, more complex side of the leadership vacuum was political. Cadorna was only able to consolidate such unchallenged power for so long because he answered only to the monarch, still a position of great power in Italy at that time. The monarch was a figure known as Vittorio Emanuele III, the grandson of the first king of unified Italy, and a weak-willed and morally suspect character. This king nevertheless enjoyed a long reign from 1900, when his father Umberto was assassinated, to 1946, when he finally abdicated in a quixotic bid to save the institution of the monarchy for his son and for Italy. Fortunately, Italy voted in a referendum to abolish the monarchy and establish a republic, and finally vindicating the true fathers of Italy, Garibaldi

and Mazzini. Victor Emanuel was so short (4'11") that he could not wear a real sword, and so his nickname was "Little Sabre". Italy engaged in at least five foolish wars during his reign, and he was instrumental in allowing Mussolini's Fascist regime to violently take control of the government and hold it for 22 years.



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i and D'Annunzio in 1925: architects of the reactionary "anti-Risorgimento". Mussolini paid the poet a yearly stipend from 1922 to his death in 1938 for not interfering in politics.

Before Mussolini, there was the fascinating and nauseating character of Gabriele D'Annunzio, a Decadent poet, for a long time the most famous person in Italy, and a bloodthirsty proto-Fascist. Thompson spends an early chapter explaining the importance of D'Annunzio in making the blustery rhetorical case for Italy's involvement in a war most Italians did not care about. The poet at least backed up his words with actions, as he was given an army commission and entered himself into many battles on his own authority, seemingly getting a rise out of the abundant bloodshed falling for Italy's sake. This disturbing character does not come out well in Thompson's account, and rightfully so, I think.

The last aspect of failed political leadership that needs mentioning is the shameful way Italy's representatives behaved both before and after the war. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister before and during most of the war, Salandra and Sonnino respectively, ensured that neither its allies nor its enemies respected Italy's shameful conduct. Italy was actually a member of a secret defensive alliance with Germany and Austria before the war. Italy did not support its allies at the outbreak of war because Austria's declaration of war against Serbia was not defensive in nature. The Italians stood on the sidelines for almost the first year of the war, playing both sides to get a better deal for its aggressive territorial claims. Everything about the beginning of World War One was tragically absurd, but Italy ended up being the most unnecessarily and nakedly opportunistic of all the belligerents. It wanted Austria to give up large parts of its territory in Trentino, South Tyrol, and Friuli (including Trieste) in return for Italy's honoring its alliance. When Austria (who was still Italy's historical nemesis despite this dubious alliance) balked, Italy obtained a secret deal with the England and France called the Treaty of London that guaranteed it would get all the territory it wanted after the war. In the end, Italy's disastrous human cost of participation in this war can be placed fully in the hands of just three people, according to Thompson—Salandra, Sonnino, and D'Annunzio.

Pointless Sacrifice

Italy's total number killed was 689,000, the total number of wounded was nearly 1,000,000, and prisoners and missing in action was also 600,000. A huge majority of them occurred on the 55-mile Isonzo front, and Italy, almost uniquely in this war, was only fighting one enemy. The total casualties of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were over three times higher than Italy's, but that includes the much larger front against Russia as well as Serbia and Romania. For further comparison,

Italy suffered more casualties during 3 1/2 years along its only front than *both* sides of the entire U.S. Civil War, which was the bloodiest in American history.



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remains of 55,000 soldiers

Again and again, the numbers of men slaughtered in each and every battle was much higher than it should have been given even modest improvements of tactics or basic respect for human life by the officers. At one hilltop near Gorizia, whose importance was only symbolic, Thompson writes: "The conquest of San Michele had cost at least 110,000 Italian casualties over 14 months, including 19,000 dead, on a sector only eight kilometers long." At one outcropping defended by the Austrians in the Dolomites, wave after wave of Italians were sent into machine-gun fire and "more than 6000 Italians had died on Col di Lana for precisely nothing." After one of the endless offensives on the Isonzo, Thompson writes of Cadorna: "As for his actual gains on the Carso, they amounted to several villages and a couple kilometers of limestone, won at a cost of 80,000 casualties." In another nameless struggle: "Five regiments were launched against the lone Habsburg battalion on Hill 383. Outnumbered by 15 to 1, the Austrians still inflicted 50% casualties on the attackers before succumbing." All of this bloodshed was obviously mind and soul-numbing, not only to the millions of soldiers who were called up, but also for the entire nation, most of whom did not want or care about

this war and did not even know why it was being fought.

After the war, Italian politicians once again played disgraceful diplomacy to the abhorrence of allies and enemies alike. Prime Minister Orlando and Foreign Minister Sonnino made absurd claims to places like Rijeka, the Dalmatian coast, Albania, and even Turkey, in order to justify their sacrifice, apparently forgetting that every other country "sacrificed" at least as much, and that Italy's position on the "winning" side of the war still did not exactly give it the moral high ground. As Thompson writes: "Orlando's and Sonnino's zero-sum strategy in Paris dealt a fatal wound to Italy's liberal system, already battered by the serial assaults of wartime. By stoking the appetite for unattainable demands, they encouraged Italians to despise their victory unless it led to the annexation of a small port on the other side of the Adriatic, with no historic connection to the motherland. Fiume [Rijeka in Croatian] became the first neuralgic point created by the Paris conference. Like the Sudetenland for Hitler's Germany and Transylvania for Hungary, it was a symbol of burning injustice. A sense of jeopardized identity and wounded pride fused with a toponym to produce an explosive compound."

D'Annunzio's thirst for violence and aggressive nationalism was not quenched at the end of the war, and he laid the blueprint for the next several decades of fascist dictators by seizing the port of Rijeka with a small militia and declaring it an independent Italian Regency. After he declared war on Italy itself the Italian navy placed a well-aimed shell in D'Annunzio's palace, which led to the poet's quick surrender and flight from the city. Furthermore, the combination of a destructive war and the economic hardships it imposed laid the foundation for future political upheaval. "This enduring sense of bitterness, betrayal, and loss was an essential ingredient in the rise of Mussolini and his Blackshirts." Thompson further comments: "For many veterans, Mussolini's myth gave a positive meaning to terrible experience. This is the story of

how the Italians began to lose the peace when their laurels were still green.”

An outside observer such as Hemingway, barely 19 years old and on the front for only one month, was able to see the war as “the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery.” Somewhat incredibly, from my experience and what I’ve read, the general opinion about the First World War in Italy is either of forgetfulness or buying into the heroic myth-making of the Fascist regime that wrote the history books in Italy for over a generation. Even if that regime is mostly discredited now (pictures of Il Duce still adorn the mantelpieces of at least a few rustic houses around the peninsula—I have even seen it with my own eyes twice!), the history involved before and during the world wars is too tragic to be accepted. The heroism of the Alpini, rugged mountain soldiers, lingers in the national consciousness more than anything else. Thompson comments that, for all the destruction, World War One was Italy’s “first true collective national experience”, one whose exorbitant cost only led its victims to embrace it even further. It may be that every symbolic “birth of a nation” always only truly comes about through a horrific spasm of violence.

I think this is where the history of one front of one particular war becomes something more universal in the human experience. War is the worst thing humans do. Based on our biological and social development, it is also one of the most complex and psychologically conflicted. The lessons of history always point to the folly of war, but that has rarely stopped opportunistic politicians and greedy businessmen from precipitating the next one, even against the wishes of the majority. In Italy, as Thompson meditates: “The Risorgimento [the national unification movement led by Garibaldi and Mazzini] was libertarian, patriotic, democratic, enlightened, and still unfinished, forever wrestling with its antithetical twin: authoritarian, manipulative, nationalistic,

conspiratorial, and aggressive. From 1915-1944, the anti-Risorgimento had the upper hand. Perhaps the two still contend for mastery of Italy's dark heart." I would venture to say that in all countries at all times, these two antithetical notions always vie for control of political power, using emotional calls to arms, for the purpose of either the enlightened betterment of all, or the greedy enrichment of a few. We must always heed these two irreconcilable ideas, and always come out on the side that seeks to end whatever war we are in, and oppose the next war.

Goodbye to Christmas Truces

We have recently passed the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, which has occasioned a fair amount of press coverage looking back at the so-called (and ill-named) "Great War" or "War to End all Wars". I intend to join this chorus with some of my own thoughts. For many people interested in history, the Second World War is the more interesting one due to its grander scale and its relatively clearly-defined moral force. For me, the First World War holds more interest since it was what I consider a "highly preventable" war that preceded and directly led to the next "necessary" or "just" war (if such a thing does exist, per Saint Augustine, then World War II is surely its closest reification in modern history). To be honest, I would rather consider both wars merely two parts of the same dance of death, punctuated by a short interval of instability (not unlike a modern and truly global version of that first "world war" reported by Thucydides – the Peloponnesian War). In any case, the causes and aftermath of the First World War would be laughingly stupid and unbelievable if they were not already tragically stupid and unbelievable. I am reminded of a quote by Jorge

Luis Borges about the 1982 Falklands War, "It is a fight between two bald men over a comb." In a similar way, we could say that the First World War was a fight between a bunch of spoiled children over who got to use the playroom. Though they all had their own toys, sharing and cooperation were unlearned traits. There is something profoundly important to remember about this tragedy, though sometimes the easiest way to deal with tragedy, if not outrage, stoicism, or escapism, involves a disarming sense of humor and irreverence. All four issues will be dealt with in this essay, in which I will focus on Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That*, his memoirs of early life in England up to and after his participation in the trenches of WWI. Graves was a highly prolific poet and author most famous for his fictional rendering of the Julio-Claudian dynasty in *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. He was born in 1895, making him 19 years old when the war began—a typical age for new officer and soldier recruits. His mother was German and his middle name was von Ranke, which was no small problem considering the bullying nationalistic anti-German hysteria before, during, and after the war, and was one that caused suspicion from bullying schoolmates and later even from fellow soldiers despite his proven competence in battle. This was a smaller version of the same problem faced by fellow writer D.H. Lawrence, a pacifist married to a German who was under de facto house arrest for the entire war.

Goodbye to All That, published 11 years after the Armistice in 1929, was Graves' second work of non-fiction after a biography of his friend T.E. Lawrence called *Lawrence and the Arabs*. By this time, Graves had already published many poetry collections, including poems written before and during the war. The publication of his memoirs came at a time in which the young author had apparently only recently recovered from years of emotional trauma that today we would call PTSD (often called "shell shock"), and the title references what he calls his "bitter leave-taking of England", including its war, its politics, its society and education, and even many of his own

family and friends. Here is a representative quote about his post-war experience: "Very thin, very nervous, and with about four years' loss of sleep to make up, I was waiting until I got well enough to go to Oxford on the Government educational grant. I knew that it would be years before I could face anything but a quiet country life. My disabilities were many: I could not use a telephone, I felt sick every time I travelled by train, and to see more than two new people in a single day prevented me from sleeping. I felt ashamed of myself as a drag on Nancy, but had sworn on the very day of my demobilization never to be under anyone's orders for the rest of my life. Somehow I must live by writing." After publication of *Goodbye to All That*, Graves moved to the Spanish island of Majorca where he remained for the rest of his life, except for a long stay in America to escape the Spanish civil war.

The book is important for its ability to capture, from the point of view of a single individual rather than a comprehensive historian, the passing of one epoch to another that occurred with the First World War—from what has been called the "long 19th century" (or the "belle époque" if you like) to the "modern age" of which we are still living (or transitioning out of to a still-undefined age). These are mere historical categories, but they tend to capture the turbulence that saw many of the changes to an old world system dating from the French Revolution, or the Middle Ages in some cases, to a new world where possibilities for progress and destruction both expanded exponentially. Graves serves as a paradigm of a certain type of young person (by definition well-educated and middle-class), especially in England but also throughout the West, after the First World War who saw personal shifts in thinking towards more radical ideas like socialism, atheism, feminism, and pacifism based on their first-hand experiences in the trenches, as well as in their jaded view of a society which they discovered to be neither as civilized nor as progressive as they had thought (I think Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, for example, captures this

sense from the German perspective).

Graves opens with an account of his family history and early years, with the first line stating his acceptance of the autobiographical convention of starting with earliest memories: witnessing Queen Victoria's 1897 Jubilee, in his case. He spends some time in these chapters detailing his visits to his aristocratic German relatives in their Bavarian castles and against whom he would later take arms.

He attended many public schools (what Americans would call private or prep schools), with the longest tenure at one called Charterhouse. Several anecdotes are given regarding the severity and hypocrisy of the education system he went through. Outdated but still powerful Victorian standards of morality accomplished little more than to stifle emotional development and foster "immorality". One such case is his description of the rampant homosexuality in these types of all-boys boarding schools, going so far as to detail his own platonic infatuation with a younger schoolmate. He dwells on his friendship with George Mallory, the famous alpinist who was an older mentor at Charterhouse and later best man at Graves' wedding. Mallory, who died on Mount Everest in 1924 after possibly being the first person to reach the summit, was mentioned as one of the only people who treated students like humans, which puzzled everyone according to Graves. Also at this time Graves took up boxing as much to defend against bullies as to keep fit, and would later prove useful in proving his manliness (and, thus, his worth) in front of soldiers and superiors alike.

The heart of the book comes in the middle chapters detailing Graves' time spent on the Western Front. At the outbreak of war, he deferred his matriculation to Oxford University in order to join the army. He was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Welsh Regiment since his family home was in Harlech in northwest Wales. Like so many other young men, he was eager to join in the fighting before the war ended (how many times it

is said at the beginning of every war that it will be over “by Christmas”). While the war obviously did not end by December 25, 1914, Graves witnessed the famous Christmas Day truce soon after joining his regiment on the Western Front (he refers to it as the Christmas 1914 fraternization, of which his regiment was among the first to participate). This event, the likes of which are rare in the annals of war, saw the belligerents, German, French, and British, come out of their trenches and join in an unarmed singing of carols and exchange of greetings and gifts. More than anything else, this short-lived sense of shared humanity and brotherhood can be interpreted as soldiers losing the martial spirit and wanting to take back control of some part of their lives, however small or temporary. I spent two Christmases in Afghanistan and well understand the sentiment of soldiers that comes at times like Christmas in which all that is desired is a temporary break from the stress and trauma of war. Even in 1914, the truce was obviously resented by the generals and politicians, who ensured there would not be a repeat of such non-warlike sentiment the next Easter or following Christmases, as well as by the Press in the involved countries, where no mention was made for at least a week after the event that hundreds of thousands laid down their arms to hobnob with the enemy. The press coverage also distorted and minimized the truce in order to make it seem more freakish and less peaceful than it actually was. The Christmas Day truce lives on in popular memory and culture, however, and this year the British supermarket Sainsbury’s went so far as to make a television commercial reenactment of it in which a German and British soldier swap chocolate and biscuits.

One of the central events in the book is the Battle of Loos, a British and French attack on German lines in September 1915 in which a few kilometers of ground changed hands and almost 100,000 men died. It was the first use of poison gas by the British, and also the battle in which Kipling’s son went permanently missing in action, prompting that writer of *The*

Jungle Book to write the sad poem "My Boy Jack." Graves describes how the gas was euphemistically referred to "the accessory", and how everyone was highly skeptical of its efficacy because its supervisors were university chemistry professors brought in to administer it. Sure enough, "the accessory" was deployed with a headwind coming into the Allied lines, causing the gas to harm the British more than the Germans it was intended for. The battle itself was also an all-around disaster. Graves mentions how, much later in the war when he had been sent home to recover from his wounds, he was asked to give a speech to 3000 incoming Canadian soldiers. "They were Canadians, so instead of giving my usual semi-facetious lecture on 'How to be Happy, Though in the Trenches', I paid them the compliment of telling the real story of Loos, and what a balls-up it had been, and why – more or less as it has been given here. This was the only audience I have ever held for an hour with real attention. I expected Major Currie to be furious, because the principal object of the Bull Ring was to inculcate the offensive spirit; but he took it well and put several other concert-hall lectures on me after this."

A key feature of *Goodbye to All That* is the farcical and probably invented dialogue, which reads like short theatrical set-pieces. It seems like almost every occasion of reported speech involves a back-and-forth rhythmic dialogue that ends in someone laying a punch-line. Along with the stock characters, this shows the fictionalized nature of Graves' memoirs (a feature which recalls Hemingway's memoir *A Moveable Feast*, or Robert Byron's travel writing masterpiece *The Road to Oxiana*).

One of the most important characters in Graves' book is Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow "war poet" who joined Graves' Royal Welch Fusiliers regiment in 1916 and struck up an immediate friendship. Sassoon published his own three-part fictionalized autobiography in the 1930's with the middle

book, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, covering the war. Like Graves, Sassoon had not published any poetry when they met, and Graves' realistic (as opposed to romantic) style influenced his friend. They both published collections before the end of the war. Sassoon was described by Graves as being one of the most courageous men he had ever seen or heard about in his time in the trenches. He tells one story in particular about how Sassoon single-handedly attacked and took control of a German observation trench, then enraged his superiors by not telling anyone about it. He was found two hours later sitting in the German trench reading a book of poetry. Sassoon, like Graves, later suffered a type of nervous breakdown and wrote his famous 1917 "Soldier's Declaration" denouncing the war and the government's incompetent prosecution of it. In this, he was encouraged by anti-war activists like Bertrand Russell and Ottoline Morrell. Sassoon threw his Military Cross for bravery into a river, though he escaped a court-martial, with Graves' help, and was sent to a hospital to recover from "shell shock". There he met Wilfred Owen, another war poet hugely influenced and encouraged by Sassoon, and who was himself killed on the Western Front one week before the Armistice. I find it worth mentioning that Sassoon and Owen were both gay. Another gay soldier was the Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein who, like Sassoon, volunteered for service at the outbreak of war and demonstrated repeated bravery in battle on the Russian Front to the point of being thought suicidal (which he also was). Such examples make one wonder why gay soldiers in the American military have until recently been considered unfit for service.

One of the most tragic, and understated, events of the book is when three officers of Graves' battalion, and three of his closest friends, were all killed in the same day by shelling and sniper fire. David Thomas, the third member of the trio of poet friends in the battalion, was among the dead. Graves states: "I felt David's death worse than any other since I had been in France, but it did not anger me as it did Siegfried.

He was acting transport-officer and every evening now, when he came up with the rations, went out on patrol looking for Germans to kill. I just felt empty and lost." Soon thereafter, he writes: "My breaking-point was near now, unless something happened to stave it off. Not that I felt frightened. I had never yet lost my head and turned tail through fright, and knew that I never would. Nor would the breakdown come as insanity; I did not have it in me. It would be a general nervous collapse, with tears and twitchings and dirtied trousers; I had seen cases like that."

Graves finished his time in the trenches during the 1916 Battle of the Somme, being injured so gravely as to be reported dead. He spent the rest of the war convalescing in hospitals, helping train new volunteers to his unit, and even being posted to Ireland where the English garrison was trying to stop (unsuccessfully, it turned out) the burgeoning Irish uprising. The rest of the book talks about his marriage to a feminist activist, their move to the country near Oxford, setting up house, opening a general store ("The moral problems of trade interested me. Nancy and I both found it very difficult at this time of fluctuating prices to be really honest; we could not resist the temptation of under-charging the poor villagers of Wootton, who were frequent customers, and recovering our money from the richer residents. Playing at Robin Hood came easily to me. Nobody ever detected the fraud"), and having four children in eight years (possibly the most amazing fact of the autobiography; he mentions at this point how sometimes he would only scrape out half an hour or so of writing a day in between his fatherly and household care taking duties—we can well imagine).

In this later part he also deals at length with his friendship with T.E. Lawrence, whose biography he wrote just before *Goodbye to All That*. Here are, in my opinion, two of the most important quotes from that chapter: "I knew nothing definite of Lawrence's wartime activities, though my brother Philip had

been with him in the Intelligence Department at Cairo in 1915, making out the Turkish Order of Battle. I did not question him about the Revolt, partly because he seemed to dislike the subject – Lowell Thomas was now lecturing in the United States on 'Lawrence of Arabia' – and partly because of a convention between him and me that the war should not be mentioned: we were both suffering from its effects and enjoying Oxford as a too-good-to-be-true relaxation. Thus, though the long, closely-written foolscap sheets of *The Seven Pillars* were always stacked in a neat pile on his living-room table, I restrained my curiosity. He occasionally spoke of his archaeological work in Mesopotamia before the war; but poetry, especially modern poetry, was what we discussed most." And the other: "Lawrence's rooms were dark and oak-panelled, with a large table and a desk as the principal furniture. There were also two heavy leather chairs, simply acquired. An American oil-financier had come in suddenly one day when I was there and said: 'I am here from the States, Colonel Lawrence, to ask a single question. You are the only man who will answer it honestly. Do Middle-Eastern conditions justify my putting any money in South Arabian oil?' Lawrence, without rising, quietly answered: 'No.' 'That's all I wanted to know; it was worth coming for. Thank you, and good day!' In his brief glance about the room he missed something and, on his way home through London, chose the chairs and had them sent to Lawrence with his card." I find these scenes moving and relevant.

The book ends in 1929, though shortly after he divorced his first wife, and got married and had four more children with his poetic muse, Laura Riding, with whom he established a publishing company at their base on Majorca. He was runner-up to the Nobel Prize in Literature won by Steinbeck, and he died at the age of 90 with 140 published works.

The whole of Graves' memoirs is filled with stories of understated and cynical humor, and pathos. In one case, he describes the last time he attended church which was during

his Easter 1916 visit home. He tells a story of having to push his mother uphill in an heavy bath chair, since the only available wheelchair in town was taken by "Countess of-I-forget-what", and then sit through a three-hour service despite being ill himself. About the ordeal he writes: "I forgot my father's gout, and also forgot that passage in Herodotus about the two dutiful sons who yoked themselves to an ox-cart to pull their mother, the priestess, to the Temple and were oddly used by Solon, in a conversation with King Croesus, as a symbol of ultimate happiness." During the sermon the "strapping" young curate, one of four men present—compared with 75 women—was "bellowing about the Glorious Performances of our Sums and Brethren in Frurnce today. I decided to ask him afterwards why, if he felt like that, he wasn't himself either in Frurnce or in khurki." His father then took him to meet War Secretary (and future Prime Minister) David Lloyd-George, who Graves says "was up in the air on one of his 'glory of the Welsh hills' speeches. The power of his rhetoric amazed me. The substance of the speech might be commonplace, idle, and false, but I had to fight hard against abandoning myself with the rest of his authence. He sucked power from his listeners and spurted it back at them. Afterwards, my father introduced me to Lloyd George, and when I looked closely at his eyes they seemed like those of a sleep-walker." It is worth mentioning that Graves' book angered so many people that even his father, one of the offended, felt it necessary to write his own memoirs as a rebuttal to his son's entitled *To Return to All That*.

While I have enjoyed and profited from reading "big" history, *Goodbye to All That* is a great example of the importance and edification of reading individual accounts of history. I always find autobiographies of great and famous people illuminating for the perspective it helps give to their time period. Though I have studied history and literature, I am no scholar and seek mostly entertainment and self-improvement in my reading. I will leave it to others to argue more

convincingly the faults or short-comings of books like Graves' or Sassoon's memoirs (Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* comes to mind, which Mike Carson has already discussed at length on this website [here](#)), but I personally find such personal accounts interesting and instructive.

Regarding a sense of humor towards destructive war declared by elites and suffered by the common man, I think it is not only in bad taste but can do more harm than good by normalizing the illegality and immorality of the war. Thus, I agree with this quote by Bertrand Russell, a pacifist who spent the last year of World War One in prison for speaking against involuntary military service for conscientious objectors: "Alas, I am that extremely rare being, a man without a sense of humour. I had not suspected this painful fact until the middle of the Great War, when the British War Office sent for me and officially informed me of it. I gathered that if I had had my proper share of a sense of the ludicrous, I should have been highly diverted at the thought of several thousand young men a day being blown into tiny little bits, which, I confess to my shame, never once caused me to smile. I am reminded of a Chinese emperor, who long ago constructed a lake made entirely of wine, and then drove his peasants into it only to amuse his wife with the struggles of their drunken drownings. Now he had a sense of humor."

Regarding a sense of humor, which can only be "dark" or cynical, by veterans against their war which may be a way to ease the personal trauma and represent, even fictionalized, the collective tragedy in which they played a part, I look up to Graves and his successors such as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, who have highly influenced the field of war literature.

Regarding the causes of destructive (and self-destructive) wars like WWI, I will leave it once more with the wise and quotable Bertrand Russell, writing here in his book *Education and the Social Order* about the innate violent sense of

retributive justice that is easily awakened in humans: "I found one day in school a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated, but he replied: 'The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that's fair.' In these words he epitomised the history of the human race." One of the things that makes us human is the ability to laugh in the face of the tragically absurd, and continue living in spite of it. Graves in this book has done just that, making his book a classic not only in the genre of war literature but in modern literature as a whole.