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THE WAR POETRY

The early war poetry fostered an attitude of unquestioning enthusiasm for heroic pieties and nationalistic feelings. But high estimation of faith and courage about the war were at sad variance with realities that further emerged in course of time. The war poetry is primarily a record of the experience of war in conventionally heroic terms till the event itself transformed this traditional response. Even then poetry remained essentially unchanged but the ‘pity of war’ as distinguished from the heroism gave poetry a new dimension.

The immediate impact of the first world war produced two distinct types of poetry. First, there was the poetry embodying the crusading faith and high ideals that had been roused in youthful hearts by the early phase
of the war. The finest flower of this spirit of noble though unrealistic idealism was the handsome Cambridge graduate Rupert Brooke(1887-1915). His mind was a noble blend of scholarship and independent social curiosity with which he combined a sensibility as wide as it was fine, an unfailing gift of spontaneous expression. His nostalgic poem “The Old Village”, “Grantchester”, full of charming home sick reminiscences of a familiar spot of the English countryside, links him with the Georgian group. In another beautiful poem “The Great Lover” he sets forth with felicity the great range of interests possessed by a modern poet. However, his poems written after the war are known for his fine seriousness and absolute spontaneousness. His idealization of war as glorious endeavour in the cause of civilization and humanity has at times invested his patriotism with sincere passion that moved his generation in the grip of war with a strange power. This note as well as his variegated poetic gifts can be seen at their best in the beautiful sonnet “The Soldier” written a few weeks before his death in 1915.

Another poet, Julian Grenfell died in 1915 also idealized and romanticised the war.

The second phase of the war saw this early idealism turn into bitter disillusionment. The chief war poets of the period Wilfred Owen(1893-1918) and Siegfried Sassoon(1886-1967) found war a horrible thing of
unredeemed evil, a dirty and cruel game, unworthy of civilization in which young men were sacrificed in thousands like herds of cattle. Sassoon voiced his anger through fierce satires. He emphasizes the chasm between those who make decisions or accede to them and those who suffer the consequences of them. He attacks not only the generals or ‘the Scarlet majors’ of the poem “Base Details” but also the uncomprehending noncombat civilians. When Sassoon expands his themes as in “To Any Dead Officer” or “To One Who was with Me in the War”, his ideas diffuse and his structure become untidy.

It was the deeper indignation of Wilfred Owen who was killed in an action a few days before the Armistice, that produced the most memorable poetry of the period. Owen’s deep humanity combines with his remarkable imagination to bring out the pity and the futility of the war mania of modern man. His lamentations at times appears like the wailing voice of the humanity itself. Owen’s “Strange Meeting”, often conveniently interpreted as a knowing epitaph, pictures an escape from battle into ‘some profound dull tunnel; a granite trench beyond a muddy trench, somehow a relic of the great Titanic Wars’. The poem moves to a meeting of enemies and to a mystic past - mortal reconciliation of two slaughtered soldiers:

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I know you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold
Let us sleep now………”

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