CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Poetic types and trends in the early two decades of the twentieth century witnessed new types of poetry in the history of English Literature. Certainly the poetry of this period was different from Romantics’ and Victorians’. This phase of English Poetry showed the temper of the poetry of ‘actual life’ as expressed by W.B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost. Irish poetry was inspired by a sense of nationalism. It was largely patriotic in its theme and content.

The other important groups of poets of the early twentieth century were those poets who contributed to the Georgian Poetry Vols. I-V edited by Edward Marsh, between 1912-1922. They were generally known as Georgian poets after the name of King George V (1910-1935). These Georgian Poets generally continued Romantic tradition of poetry, especially in their love for men, Nature and the countryside. Besides, they were also deeply attached to their land which they knew and loved best. While these poets were enjoying their weekend visits to the countryside and writing about Nature, supernatural elements,
dreams of Arabia and childhood etc. the First World War burst over their head in 1914. It rocked the whole world and raised many questions about human civilization and industrial development. It brought about a total change in the outlook of many of these poets. Many of the alert minds had to come out of their utopian world. Some of them directly participated in the war. Therefore, a new kind of Poetry came to be written during and after the First World War in which they extensively wrote about their experiences of war. The poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and many others began to write on the field experiences of pity, horror, despair and hopelessness of the War. Dominic Hibberd rightly puts it when he says that “many young men who wrote poetry and took it seriously in the war years were either Georgians or were aware of the Georgians”\(^1\)

The English Poetry of the First World War can, roughly, be divided into two periods: the early period, from the outbreak of the War to 1916, the time of the battle of the Somme; and the later period, from 1916 to 1918 and the Armistice. The two periods are very different in mood. In the earlier period the poet like Rupert Brooke, C.H. Sorley, Julian Grenfell Robert Nichols etc. believed in simple, heroic and mystic vision of a
struggle for the right, of noble sacrifice for an ideal of patriotism and country.

As the war prolonged, and dreams of an early end to the hostilities faded, the mood of the poet changed and darkened. It became a War of attrition, in which huge offensives were planned, again and again. It failed at a shattering cost in terms of material and lives. The carnage and sufferings were endless, pointless and full of horror. The dreams were shattered, and patriotism became a matter of grim endurance against all odds. The chief voices of this new mood among the poets, which brought forth what is still most memorable and enduring to later generations, are Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund and Isaac Rosenberg etc.

The First World War was a global military conflict which broke out in Europe from 1914 to 1918, resulting in more than forty million casualties, including approximately twenty million military and civilian deaths. The term War came into existence during and after the First World War. A number of poets writing in English had been soldiers, and had written about their experiences of the war. Many of them had died, most notably Rupert Brooke, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg. Others such as Siegfried Sassoon,
Edmund Blunden etc. had survived and made a reputation based on their scathing poetry.

In chapters II to V an attempt has been made to analyse the poetry of each of these individual poets with a view to finding out as to how these poets represent the idea of war? What were their experiences? How did they manage to convey these experiences, and what was the impact of war on these sensitive souls which they ultimately expressed in their poetry?

Chapter II presents the poetic struggle of Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) widely regarded as the most important poet of the First World War. Owen would provide a fitting beginning to see the struggle of his poetry and the human need for meaning in terms of the War. Owen appeared to have thought of his poems as manifestos, truthful reports on what was happening on the Front. Owen wanted to stir compassion at its deepest level to reveal the naked truth of the war resulting in the loss of material and human lives. In the introduction for the volume of his collected poems published posthumously, he writes:

_Above all I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is war, and the pity of war. The Poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies_
are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All the poet can do is to warn. That is why true poets must be truthful.²

The truth is, of course, capable of an astonishing musical orchestration in his finest and most mature poems. Owen’s most famous and most anthologized poem, “Strange Meeting” is said to have been inspired consciously or unconsciously by the fifth canto of Shelley’s Revolt of Islam (Laos and Cythna):

“All whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside,
With quivering lips and humid eyes;—and all
Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide
Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall
In a strange land, round one whom they might call
Their friend, their chief, their father, for assay
Of peril, which had saved them from the thrall
Of death, now suffering, Thus the vast array
Of those fraternal bonds were reconciled that day.”

In both poems the speaker is accompanied by an enemy soldier whom he now considers an ally or friend. Owen’s poem entitled “Strange meeting” deals with the meeting after death,
or in dreams, of one English soldier and a German soldier he had killed:

“It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred…”

This mysterious, harrowing and prophetic poem is also remarkable technically for its use of assonance, or para-rhyme to increase the effect of half-reality, half-dream that pervades through it. Owen used assonance in a number of other poems but no where more telling than in “Strange Meeting”. Some of Owen’s best-known poems were written as bitterly ironic comments or near parodies of well-known Romantic poems. An outstanding instance of this is the way he turned Swinburne’s ‘Before the Mirror’ inside out in “Greater Love”. Swinburne’s initial stanza is:

‘White rose in red rose-garden
Is not so white;
Snowdrops that plead for pardon
And pine for fright
Because the hard East blows

Over their maiden rows

Grow not as this face grows from pale to bright…"

(CP, ll. 1-7)

While Owen’s feeling of scorn and revulsion against the languidly exotic mood can be imagined in: “Greater Love”:

“Red lips are not so red

As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.

Kindness of wooed and wooer

Seems shame to their love pure.

O love, your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead! …”

(CP, ll. 1-7)

As the war aggravated Owen clearly decided to tell the truth—his truth— and to make the most sharp-edged poetry possible out of his vision. When Graves suggested to him “that he should sometimes write more cheerful poems”3, Owen’s answer was to send him one of his greatest poems of the Great War. In this poem his irony, his uncompromising realism and his compassionate fellow-feeling with the sufferings of the soldiers are expressed as a counterpoint:
‘I, too, saw God through mud,-
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child…”

(CP, ll. 1-4)

In his later phase Owen adopted irony as a means of expressing his disgust and disillusionment with the War.

Chapter III deals with the experiences of Sassoon not as an overwhelmingly violent force but as a profound poetic voice of the First World War. Sassoon came from a well-to-do family. He was educated at Marlborough and Cambridge, without distinguishing himself scholastically either at the school or at the university. But in his earliest years he developed a passion for outdoor games and sports. In his first autobiographical book, Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man, he describes how cricket, golf, hunting etc. came to absorb more and more of his time and dreams. He began to write poetry at an early age- but his first poems written during his war time service show little more than his deeply ingrained love for the countryside, his belief in England’s cause and the sense of ‘fighting for our freedom’.
It was only later, with the experience of actual fighting that his highly sensitive nature began to feel the truth about soldiers’ life in the trenches. This experience of death and suffering moved him and compelled him to record them in his poetry. He was a fearless soldier and was known as ‘Kangaroo’. Like so many other early poets, Sassoon also voiced the idealism of the first months of the war. “Absolution” for example, was admittedly influenced by Brooke’s famous sonnet sequence. Sassoon celebrates the moral change provided by the war:

“The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge, yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free...”

(CP, ll. 1-4)

Sassoon’s early poems of 1915 do not embody any profound attitude towards the conflict. During his period of initiation onto trench fighting he wrote no poems that voice any sudden disillusionment; the transition from naïve idealism to the realistic attitude. In early 1916 Sassoon began to produce a few ‘genuine trench poems’ which “aimed at impersonal description of front-line conditions”.

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“The Redeemer”, and “A Working Party” were written from the point of view of an interested but not deeply affected spectator.

But the battle of Somme deepened this mood, and he began to write poems full of bitterness, satire and anguish. In these poems the feeling is too deep, and too sincere.

Sassoon’s longer poems portray more realistic description of the war situation. His description of the horrors of the war achieves its mounting effect in such poems. The most important war poems of The Old Huntsman present the character of Sassoon’s response during the course of a single year, from January 1916 to January 1917. That year was psychologically the most crucial of the entire war. And Sassoon’s poetic growth clearly accompanies the growing disaffection of 1916. The thirty-nine poems of Counter Attack were written during Sassoon’s second period of convalescence in England. At this stage he was undergoing with the profound personal crisis which resulted in his anger and disillusionment against the war. The tormented state of mind produced agonized poems of Counter Attack.

The chapter IV of the study discusses the war poets of the early period – Rupert Brooke and Charles Sorley. The first part
of the chapter deals with Rupert Brooke’s vision of patriotism, glory and aspiration of death to find a meaning in the meaningless world. Rupert Brooke was a young man of remarkable charm and beauty. He won Scholarship to King’s College Cambridge, where he spent five years as a leader of the literary world. He began to publish poems in Journals in 1909, the year in which he settled at Granchester. His collection *Poems 1911* was well received. In 1912 he wrote a stark one-Act play *Lithuania* and suffered a serious breakdown which led him in to travel to the U.S. in 1913. In Tahiti he wrote *Tiara Tahiti* and other poems, often considered among his best. His five War sonnets, which included “*The soldier*” (If I should die think only this of me......) appeared in New Numbers early in 1915. The ecstatic reception they received made him the nation’s poet of the War, a reputation enhanced by the publication of *1914 and Other Poems*. His is an important name among the poets of the First World War. His five largely acclaimed war sonnets have been thoroughly analysed in the present study. Since they (sonnets) are the most anthologized poems of the war period. Their realism and the depth of understanding have found an echo in the experience of the disillusioned post war generations.
Brooke became famous for his innocence writing. The extraordinary syntax of Brooke’s poems show gradual symphony of worthiness and worthlessness. The innocence of Brooke is a liberating and humanizing force for him. The war provided him a way out to escape from the ills of the world. As John Lehman rightly opines: “It was war that changed Brooke into the almost sacred and supreme poet figure of his generation…”6

Brooke’s sonnet I “Peace” propounds the idea that war is clean and cleansing like a Jolly good swim. According to him the only thing that can suffer in war is the body. Sonnet II “Safety” testifies how War may lead to death which is the safest of all shelters against the dangers of life. Sonnet III “The Dead” is a conventional voice, ‘Honour has come back, as a king to earth…’ Sonnet IV “The Dead” concerns the past life of the dead. Sonnet V “The Soldier” is “a frank and unashamed piece of patriotism…”7

Charles Sorley’s Marlborough and Other Poems was published in 1916, a year after he was killed by a sniper’s bullet. By 1919 it had run through four editions; a fifth appeared in 1922. Sorley’s name and fame rests with some of his remarkable war poems of the time.
Enright rightly says that the “poems that Sorley wrote in the last years of his life express new attitudes to the war which is quite different from those of Brooke and Grenfell. They are the attitudes of men who have known the horror and boredom of modern warfare at first hand”

Sassoon having experienced the horror of actual warfare, began to describe its true nature in his satirical poems. Owen was profoundly and intensely exploring the tragedy and the pity of war, and wrote some of the greatest poems inspired by the Great War of 1914-1918. In this sense Sorley is a stepping-stone from Brooke to Sassoon. Sorley does not echo the sentiments of Brooke or of the patriotic versifiers of 1914. It is assumed that he felt no hatred of the Germans, but declared that, “the British and the German soldiers were linked in a common tragedy; it seems natural to suppose that he was anticipating the emotional responses of Owen and of Rosenberg, and foreshadowing their beliefs about the pity of war.”

Besides his poems Sorley’s letters are also an extraordinary record of the growth of an original and independent outlook. They demonstrate the incalculable effects of the war. It is chiefly through his letters that Sorley’s personality is known to
us. In his few poems and in his letters Sorley not only displays a grasp of the essential truths but also anticipates the bitter revelations which were to inspire Sassoon’s satiric utterances as well as Owen’s vision of destruction.

Chapter V focuses on yet another important poet Edmund Blunden (1896-1974). He was a countryman born and bred with country tradition in English poetry. He wrote a number of poems which clearly indicate the deeply moving characteristic of the man and his attitude to the war. Probably the most impressive and the most comprehensive of Blunden’s war poetry is his long blank-verse poem, “Third Ypres”. The following lines may be cited as his deeply tragic and worst of his war experiences:

“The grey rain,
Steady as the sand in an hourglass on this day,
Where through the window the red lilac looks,
And all’s still, the chair’s odd click is noise-
The rain is all heaven’s answer, and with hearts
Past reckoning we are carried into night
And even sleep is nodding here and there…”

(CP, ll. 55-62)
Most of the war poets ultimately confined themselves to the ugly face of the war. But in Blunden succeeded in retaining his intellectual and imaginative capabilities. His senses always remain equally active for the beauty as well as the horror and repercussions of the war.

Blunden’s poems see the struggle as a destroying agent of Nature and the humanity. His sense of despair, loss, isolation and hopelessness is represented through his war poems. His poetry presents the war as a deliberate, purposeless activity which has threatened the existence.

In brief it may be said that initially some of these war poets were full of patriotic feeling and believed that they were fighting for a just and noble cause but ultimately they seem to be disappointed. They realized that war was a destroying force which reduces human beings and their beliefs to hopelessness, despair and agony. Despite their differences in conceptualization and presentation of the war each of these poets face the same existentialist problem.
References


9. Ibid, p. 199

10. Ibid p. 127