CHAPTER – IV

Rupert Chawner Brooke
(1887-1915)

&

Charles Hamilton Sorley
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One of the three brothers, Rupert Chawner Brooke (1887-1915) was born in Rugby, England, where his father served as a school master at Rugby School, which he attended. In 1911 he published Poems which was regarded even by his detractors as a herald of a major talent. Brooke suffered an emotional breakdown in 1912, following failure in his love affair. He embarked on a trip to North America and the South Pacific in 1913. After the outbreak of the First World War, he returned to England and received a commission in the Royal Navy. While preparing for the assault on Gallipoli, Turkey, Brooke died of blood poisoning aboard ship in the Aegean Sea. He was buried in an olive grove on the Island of Scyros.

An English poet, critic, a scholar and an athlete, Brooke was considered first a Georgian and then a War poet. He was as famous for his charm and good looks as for his poetry. Yeats called him “the handsomest man in England”\(^1\). The Decadents
were an important early influence on Brooke which he, in due course of time shed for the metaphysical poets, especially Donne. Brooke’s poetry is light, witty and sometimes sentimental, often lyrical. In his later works he experimented with poetic realism, as is illustrated in the Poems of daily life with common speech patterns. It was at King’s College, Cambridge, that Brooke established a large circle of literary friends. Here, he had, such notable personalities as Virginia Woolf, Walter de la Mare, Edward Marsh, Henry James and Winston Churchill. ‘The rural Old Vicarage at Granchester’, which Brooke temporarily made his home, provided inspiration for a major poem of the same title and became the central meeting place for literary discussions. An impact of these literary discussions paid dividend in the form of his famous War sonnets.

His poetry was published in *Poems (1911); 1914 and Other Poems (1915); and Collected Poems (1918)*. His only critical work, *John Webster and Elizabethan Drama (1916)*, evinces his critical insight into the dramatist of the period. *Letters from America (1916)* is his another prose work.

At its best Brooke’s War sonnet sequence has been influenced by the onset of the World War I. He completed his famous
1914 sonnets during the early stages of the War, demonstrating in them a romantic, crusading vision typical of the English civilian spirit at that time. Brooke is usually considered typical of the early group of war poets. His War poems consisting of the famous five Sonnets appeared first in the fourth and final issue of New Numbers (December 1914).

In the Preface to his 1943 Anthology of War Poems Robert Nichols comments about Brooke’s sonnet sequence that of “sensation of being gathered up and lifted... as an opportunity to accept a rare moral Challenge.”2 Rupert Brooke’s sonnets are full of that sensation of being gathered up. They are wonderful works of art. His sonnets are elegant, melodious, and rich in texture. 1914 sonnets not only deal with the war, they also reveal a sophisticated sensibility meditating itself on the verge of War. This work in fact was inspired by a great moral, intellectual and social crisis.

In sonnet I, “Peace”, the poet is gracefully thankful to the War, for the moral challenge it had posed. This challenge, however, is not in co-ordination with the external wrong to be righted but due to the opportunity for personal and moral enlistment, as it is clear from the following lines:
“Now, God be thanked who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honor could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!”

(CP, ll.1-8)

The poet rejoices in his escape from a world ‘grown old and cold and weary’. He wants an escape from a malaise of the ills of the time he lived in. The sestet leads to a comfortable emotional paradox. According to the poet, pain and sufferings of warfare could bring a spiritual and emotional ‘peace”; in battle, “the worst friend and enemy is but Death”. The lines quoted above contrasts the inadequacies of poetry and love with ‘swimmers into cleanness leaping’ and a consequent ‘release’. The poet thinks that only the body will be destroyed. The undercurrent Brookean tendency of self-warriorship is in search of a confluence where an exquisite meeting of beauty and death could be possible. These lines also suggest a kind of personal disillusionment. There is a juxtaposition of
dramatizing vague moral contrast. On the one hand, the poet goes through a moral crisis, on the other hand, he realizes that death is only a refuge he can get into. He wants release from a life he is not satisfied with. It’s a kind of brokering peace through escape. He is an isolated person in his own world. There is a kind of internal whirlpool at the back of his mind. He tries to explore a variety of ways illustrating the futility and meaninglessness of the existing life.

Sonnet II, “Safety” with its echo of Donne’s “The Anniversarie”, is also developed in terms of a paradox; the moral crusade, by its very nobility, gives assurance of a kind of spiritual safety and realization of immortality. In this poem images change with the changes of the mood. There is a sacrificial urge emerging out of passion for a meaningful life:

“We have gained a peace unshaken by pain for ever.
War knows no power. Safe shall be my going,
Secretly armed against all death’s Endeavour;
Safe though all safety’s lost; safe where men fall;
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.”

*(CP,ll.10-14)*
War or death ‘knows no power’. One will be ‘safe’ whatever happens. ’And if these poor limbs die, safest of all’. ‘Poor’ registers both Brooke’s emotional self-involvement and recognition of the body’s inadequacy. The war is viewed in terms of its personal effects on the poet. Besides its personal touch they explore and evoke a feeling of emotive and imaginative triumphs. There is an implication of a way of transition from physical monotonous life to a retrospective awareness. With such sort of implying relevance to eternity he becomes an everlasting embodiment of self-sacrificing idealism. It is in the nature of the War which provides a kind of moral regeneration for those who longs to volunteer to fight it. As John H. Johnston rightly puts, “the nature and the purpose of the struggle remain undefined: they exist as vast unspoken premises behind the rhetoric of self-revelation and the artful shifts of paradox. The attitude of world-weariness, the suggestion of personal disillusion in love, and the hint of past “shame”.3

“The Dead” (III) celebrates ‘honor’, but remains typical in ‘the rich dead’ who ‘poured out the red sweet wine of youth’. Youth’s sacrifice is more than patriotism, it is called ‘holiness’, it is a thing in itself, youth’s perfect hour. This poem is
concerned with the implications of death. This poetic conception involves a number of elements; the pathos of terminated and unfulfilled hopes and joys. This sonnet considers the selfless generosity of the young men who have fallen in the battle:

“These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.”

(CP,ll.4-8)

The inspirational effect of these sacrifices on the living, and the assurance that death in the battle procures is a matter of remote contemplation. The poet is meditating on his own possible death. It gives him the cumulative emotional substance of these themes in an explicit personal application. Brooke is intellectually imaginative and possesses, in a rare degree, with a sense of sacrifice. His preoccupation with the actual experiences is vital. He is adventurous, daring, keen and his curiosity and interest in ideas are remarkable. Walter de la Mare beautifully sums up this approach in the following words:
“His writing... is itself a kind of action; and he delights far more than the mystics’ in things touched, smelt and tasted. He delights, that is, in things in themselves not merely for their beauty or for the unseen reality they represent. He is restless, enquiring, veers in the wind like a golden weather cock...”

Though the emotions that his War sonnets express are not of those of a combatant but they belong to a particular emotive overflow of powerful feelings consequently in tune with the current moment. Brooke never got into the self-glorifying stage, because he did not get to the War.

The fourth sonnet also called “The Dead”, remembers how they (the dead) had known the varied sense-impressions of earth:

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvelously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colors of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly freinded;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is
Ended.”  

(CP, ll.1-9)
These lines also deal with the implications of a way of transition from physical meaninglessness of life to a retrospective consciousness as “a pulse in the eternal mind”. Sassoon’s conceptions involve a number of vital elements; the pathos of unfulfilled desire, of hope and joy. This inspirational effect of sacrifices assures that death in the battlefield obtains eternal peace to his longing soul.

In “The Soldier”, which is the fifth in the sonnet sequence, Brooke concentrates on his body, made by England, after dying in a foreign land, where there shall be ‘in that rich earth a richer dust concealed’. The heart’ (i.e. mind or spirit) will preserve the sounds and scents of its earthly experience. The impressions are both physical and eternal:

If I should die, think only this of me;
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam.
A body of England’s breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

(CP, ll.1-8)
In these lines Brooke anticipates his own possible death. It is an effort on the poet’s part to collect a larger emotional substance for personal agenda. He speaks in person, dramatizing the pathos of his own expected death. This poem cinematographically portrays the country to which he loved so much. The ‘pastoral beauty’ ‘certainty’ and ‘quite kind’ image has fascinated him. Here he tries to get a basis for him to be sacrificed. Brooke establishes a relationship between self and the values of the world around.

Charles Hamilton Sorley, a fellow soldier, refused to accept this proclamation. Sorley’s observation about Brooke in this regard is, “that last sonnet sequence of his war sonnets which has been so praised I find (with exception of that beginning ‘these hearts were woven of human joys and cares’..., The Dead (IV) over praised. He is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself(and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct, demand of him (and others) by the turn of circumstances, where non-compliance with his demand would have made life intolerable. It was not that ‘they’ gave up anything of that list he gives in one sonnet: but that the essence of these things had been endangered by
circumstances over which he had no control, and he must fight to recapture them. He has clothed his attitude in fine words; but he has taken the sentimental attitude”.\(^5\)

C. Wilson Knight (essay dated 1971) is of the opinion that, “Brooke was a War poet for only the length of those last five War sonnets, until then, through nearly a hundred poems he had been a lyric poet of youth, love and Death, who developed from a late Decadent to an early Georgian...his poetry sounds the way the poetry should sound...”\(^6\)

The *Poems of 1911* also confirm this. For example, the following lines from the poem entitled “Sonnet:

Oh! Death will find me, long before I tire
Of Watching you; and swing me suddenly
Into the shade of loneliness and mire
Of the last land! There waiting patiently,
One day I think, I'll feel a cool wind blowing,
See a slow light across the Stygian tide,
And hear the Dead about me stir, unknowing,
And tremble. And *I* shall know that you have died.”

(*CP*, ll.1-8)
The theme of Death is the most favourite subject of Brooke’s poetry. A list of favourite attitude regarding words and gestures could be made that would constitute Brooke’s sense of what was poetic. This idea turn up again and again, rearranged, dream and gleam, heart, tears, sorrow, grey, yearning, and weary cries and sighs and of course everywhere Love and Death. He seems to be an ambassador of a gloomy life.

In “Fragment” ‘gay machine of splendor’ contemplates the predicament of the frontline soldiers. The words like, ‘lamplight’, ‘color shadows’ and ‘strange ghosts’ give powerful ironic touch to the prevailing foreseen situations. ‘Dawn’ and ‘Death’ are recurrent features of his War and non-War poems as well.

Poems like - “In Memory’, “Waikiki”, “The Funeral of Youth”, “Dust” and in many other non-war poems ‘dawn’ and ‘death’ interplay the poet’s gloomy temperament. In “Retrospect”, ‘street at night’, ‘dark clouds’, ‘a moonless sky’ convey the same message:

‘O heaven without wave or tad
Silence, in which all songs have died!
Holy book, where hearts are still!
And home at length under the hill!

O mother-quite, breasts of peace,

Where love itself would faint and cease!

O infinite deep I never knew,

I would come back, come back to you,

Find you, as a pool! Unstirred,

Kneel down by you, and never a word,

Lay my head, and nothing said,

In your hands, ungarlanded;

And a long watch you would keep;

And I should sleep, and I should sleep!”

(\textit{CP}, ll.27-40)

These lines represent an element of world-weariness and certainly a touch of death-wish. There is a blending of romanticism and irony. There is an impression of the anxiety as well. Brooke painfully attempts to peer into the hereafter. The poet passes from one image to another, like a man who is hunting for a match in a dark room. He conjures up horrible pictures. He has also a pre-conceived notion of endless bliss. He loves the existing world passionately. “Life on the earth is to him like first love, which he knows will be followed by other loves, but will never be repeated”.7
Brooke greeted War with enthusiasm because it was an affair of a righteous cause for him. As a result of his early and untimely death and unfulfilled literary promise he became a symbol of the talented youth killed in the war. His War writings express the initial stages of patriotism. He tuned in the later generation of the War poets to show their anger and disillusionment. His death, his personal attraction and the charm of his verse made him a symbol of all the gifted youth killed in the First World War.

So far as his War poems are concerned they are imperative and about a man who is always contemplating about his possible eternity. He is like Tennyson’s visionary troopers:

“Theirs not to reason why
Theyrs but to do and die”.

According to Brooke War is not only a noble act but also a means of release from the cruel world. His attitude towards War shows a kind of triumphant outlook. He seems to be an embodiment of bravery and sacrifice. Brooke is of the view that it is life that is tragic and painful. He thinks that a man could triumph life by dying bravely. His matrimonial gesture with love, suffering, life and death, pity and excitement are some of
the remarkable aspects of his poetry in general. He wants a
release from the personal difficulties. Brooke’s sentimentality
takes us in to a whirlpool which he goes through. He planned
to shake the world by being energetic and brave. He dreamed
of a vision settling his feet upon an arduous task.

Brooke’s poems are sometimes hysterical, exhibiting self-pity
and emotional outburst. But there is also power and
conviction in them. His imagination comes directly into contact
with the reality he realized. His language is the most abiding
force of his poetic imagination. In retrospect he realises the
facts of life. His depiction is about an extreme situation.
Brooke in his poems constitutes a conflict between desire and
reality, and reason and instinct. His individuality continues to
struggle to attain eternity. Almost all of his War and non-war
poems are the remembrance of the things past, present and
future. The thinking of the past, the present and the future all
shake on his existence depriving him of any peace. The
fragmented preoccupation with reality and its impact
continued to interest him. He is always pre-occupied with the
vision of ‘meeting with eternity’. He is a natural poet of a class
whose natural way of spokespersonship is to get sacrificed and
become immortal.
Brooke’s temperament is not hypersensitive. He does not dare to face the ferocious assault. His sacrificial undercurrent makes him passive. He lives on the razor edge of his sense of eternity. Notwithstanding the criticism of his poetry, it could also be taken into consideration that he was not really free to choose attitude. Because he was on the sharp edge of the Georgian era. The extraordinary tuned music and lyricism of his poetry constitutes technical achievement. Elegantly employed symbol reflects his technical poetic maturity in implying death.

Brooke’s poetry is mostly inspired by his passionate patriotic feeling for his country England. He is a victim of a continuous depression with life. He seems to be extremely serious person always meditating on issues like- love, history and death. A pathological examination of his poetry reveals that Brooke is always preoccupied with issues concerning humanity. He is greatly engaged with social and moral crisis. His poetry is an assertion of a realization of his dream he was longing for. He is overwhelmed by the unknown potential for good. Brooke is in search of liberation from chaos and uncertainty to a complete harmony. After the death of Rupert Brooke Winston Churchill said:
“... During the last few months of his life, months of preparation in gallant comradeship and open air, the poet-soldier told with all the simple force of genius the sorrow of youth about to die, and the sure triumphant consolations of a sincere and valiant spirit. He expected to die: he was willing to die for the dear England whose beauty and majesty he knew: and he advanced towards the brink in perfect serenity, with absolute conviction of the rightness of his country’s cause and a heart devoid of hate for fellow-men...”

Brooke shows his poetic strength by combining satire and tenderness. His poetry resumes every spiritual attitude of humanity towards history--a destruction of all ideals and a final renaissance of wonder. For Brooke War was not altogether an evil; instead: “it cleans and purifies: it invigorates”. Brooke’s War sonnets are fluent, skilful. They hit exactly the right note of love for his country and patriotic self-sacrifice for a noble cause. It is important, however, to emphasise that his pre-war poetry is in striking contrast to the mood of the 1914 Sonnets. After the disillusionment of the later course of the War, which was so vividly expressed by Sassoon and Owen. We are all too painfully aware of rhetoric.
and a strain of sentimentality exemplified in the last six lines of “The Dead’ (III):

“Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
There is none of those so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying has made us rarer gifts than gold...”

(CP, ll.1-3)

G. Wilson Knight (essay date 1971) says:

“Though thoughts to which he expresses in the very few incomparable war sonnets which he has left behind will be shared by many thousands of young men moving resolutely and blithely forward into this... They are a whole history and revelation of Rupert Brooke himself. Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed, with classic symmetry of mind and body, ruled by high undoubting purpose, he was all that one would wish England’s noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely offered”.

Brooke’s sonnets are important the way the story of his life and death becomes an obituary of a class and a generation that was destroyed in the War. G. Wilson Knight further says:
“...The more we know about Brooke, and the more carefully we read his poems, the more he will be diminished as an important literary figure, and as a hero. And this is only proper: he has been Apollo too long. But myths are rarely killed by facts.”

Though Brooke’s poetry faced a criticism which is harsh, demanding, and unfriendly in its nature particularly suspicious about the qualities for which his poetry is best known. Nevertheless against all criticism here lies the fact that Brooke’s poetry is delightful and soothing to the readers’ heart and mind. In spite of the fact of Brooke’s ability to survive among the standard poets is bleak, among the critics, his prominence in the poetic world is still acceptable. People like to read Brooke. In my opinion he has that vigor ‘of the poetic flavor’ to be established in the literary heritage.

What Brooke had to say he said with a conviction and moral earnestness, which commanded immediate attention. As technical achievements, five War sonnets which make up the sequence are noteworthy. The popularity of Brooke’s War sonnets of 1914 sequence is accounted for by the fact that through it Brooke expressed the temper of the contemporary situation.
This is also the fact that the great poet is more than the voice of his generation; he is a prophet as well. Indeed, many of the greatest poets have been in revolt against their time. But Rupert Brooke proclaims the simple nationalistic faith of his own day, nicely expressed in the concluding sonnet sequence:

“If I should die think only this of me;

That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England.”

(CP, ll. 1-3)

It is true that traditionally conventional patriotism has largely ceased to be an inspirational force. But it is not fair to acknowledge that none of Brooke’s sonnets of the sequence has meaning beyond its own time. For example ‘The Dead’ has little relation to any particular time or place Brooke developed spirituality to the point where he is able to accept without fear or regret the fact of death. He finds in death a beauty surpassing anything that he has found in life.
References

1. Dedria Bryfonski & S.K.Hall, *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, vol.2, Gale Research, Detroit, 1979, p. 50
9. Ibid, p. 132
11. Ibid, P. 55
Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895-1915)
Charles Hamilton Sorley was born on 19 May, 1895 in Aberdeen, Scotland. He was the son of William Ritchie Sorley. He was educated, like Sassoon, at Marlborough College (1908-13). At Marlborough College Sorley’s favorite pursuit was cross-country running in the rain, a theme evident in many of his pre-war poems, including “Rain” and “The Song of the Ungirt Runners”. Before taking up a scholarship to study at University College, Oxford, Sorley studied in Schwerin, Germany, until the outbreak of the First World War. Later Sorley returned to England and volunteered for military service, joining the Suffolk Regiment. He arrived at the Western Front in France as a lieutenant in May in 1915, and quickly rose to the rank of Captain at the age of only twenty. Sorley was killed in action, shot in the head by a sniper, at the battle of Loos on October 13, 1915.

Sorley was also an early poet of the Great War. His poetry is of a very different style from Brooke’s. As a matter of fact Sorley
was very much critical of Brooke’s 1914 sonnets. He claimed that Brooke was over-praised and obsessed with his own sacrifice. Sorley was primarily influenced by Goethe, Hardy, Ibsen and Homer. Nevertheless he was critical of the late Victorians:

“The voice of our poets and men of letters is finally trained and sweet to hear; it seems with sharp saws and rich sentiment: it is a marvel of delicate technique: it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes: it is a living lie.”

He was also critical of some of Hardy’s more “public” poetry, but praised The Dynasts for its honesty and truth to events and human nature. According to Robert Giddings ‘It was his attachment to German Culture that made it easy for him to distrust the shallow British patriotism which greeted the start of the War’. But at the same time, he was astonished and distressed by the brutal ways of German onslaught on the trenches. In September 1914 he wrote:

“For the joke of seeing an obviously just cause defeated, I hope Germany will win. It would do the world good and show that real faith is not that which says ‘we must win for our cause is just’, but that which says ‘our cause is
just: therefore we can disregard defeat’. All outlooks are at present material, and the unseen value of justice as justice, independent entirely of results, is forgotten. It is looked upon merely as an agent for winning battles.”

Sorley conceived a deep, almost loving admiration for his country. Though increasingly aware of the darker side of German culture, the militaristic spirit he applauded the efficiency, the love of learning and music and the simple patriotism that pervaded the country. When the War broke out, he appeared to be quite clear of his intentions that the Allied cause was just, and that it was his business as an English man to fight for his country for all the faults he saw in it. He subscribed to a deep loving admiration for the country.

Robert Graves, a contemporary of Sorley, described him in his book Good Bye to All That as “one of the three poets of importance killed during the War”. (The other two were Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen). In his work Sorley may be seen as a forerunner of Owen and Sassoon. His unsentimental style stands in direct contrast to that of Rupert Brooke. Sorley’s last poem which was recovered from his kit after his death which includes some of his most famous lines:
‘When you see millions of mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go’.

Sorley’s sole work was published posthumously in January 1916 and immediately became a literary success, with six editions printed the same year. Sorley is regarded by some, including the Poet Laureate John Masefield, as the greatest loss of all the poets who were killed during the First World War. Nevertheless he gives the impression of a mind already more mature than that of Brooke’s, and a poetic gift, in spite of its youthful imperfections, that might have developed to far more impressive achievements than he had already shown.

Though the poems which Sorley wrote in the early months of the War show a kind of limited attitude. But the force of his work heralded the horror, anger and disillusionment that were to characterize the later works of the War Poets of the period. As John H. Johnston says: “Charles Hamilton Sorley was perhaps the most intellectually brilliant and perceptive of the English War Poets…”⁴ Though only two or three of Sorley’s poems could be said to rank with any others inspired by the First World War as specimens of the early response. They display a grasp of reality altogether beyond the talents of Brooke, Nichols and others. It is basically through his letters
that Sorley’s personality and convictions have come up. His poems are a document of the development of an original and independent mentality. As John H. Johnston further says that this “demonstrate the incalculable effects of the War in tragically terminating the potentialities of the best minds of a whole generation”.  

When the War broke out with its upsurge of emotions, Sorley could assess the situation with calmness and maturity. He remained a critic of the sentiments expressed by those who very quickly identified their own reactions with the patriotic mood. Remarking on Hardy’s *Satires of Circumstance* in a letter dated November 30, 1914, Sorley says: “Curiously enough, I think that ‘Men who march away’ is the most arid poem in the book, besides being untrue of the sentiments of the ranks man going to war: ‘victory crowns the just’ is the worst line he ever wrote---- filched from a leading article in *The Morning Post*, and unworthy of him who had always previously disdained to insult justice by offering it a material crown like Victory”.  

Sorley’s accurate penetration into Rupert Brooke’s ‘sentimental attitude’ toward the War is another instance of his critical acuteness. In spite of the fact that Sorley’s
patriotism was beyond doubt, he distrusted the emotions aroused by “childish and primitive questions of national honour”.

So far as Sorley’s poetic career is concerned he had started writing poetry at the age of ten but we have only about thirty-eight poems which could be said to be the mature work and of these “only nine are classified by his editors as poems ‘Of War and Death’.” Though Sorley’s life was cut short due to his untimely death and therefore he was denied the opportunity to witness the catastrophic war at length. He began to feel the meaninglessness of the argument for War before the battle of Loos claimed him in the autumn of 1915. He declared his spirit in a sonnet “To Germany”, which ends in a truly prophetic attitude:

When it is peace, then we may view again
With new-won eyes each other’s truer form
And wonder, Grown more loving-kind and warm
We’ll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain
When it is peace. But until peace, the storm,
The darkness and the thunder and the rain”.

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll.5-7)
Sorley had perceived how grimly it came about, that the man in the trenches was cut off by an impassable gulf from the people at home:

“When you see millions of mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you’ll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow. . . .”

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll.1-7)

In this poem Sorley speaks of the vast numbers who died and the finality of their passing, this time openly reproving the facile elegiac sentiments of 1914. As John H. Johnston puts:

“The haunted, visionary quality of the sonnet brings to mind Hardy’s “The Souls of the Slain, wherein the victims of the Boer War, after their spectral visit to England’s shores, plunge “to the fathomless regions/ of myriads forgot”.

Sorley’s poetic ideas evolved rapidly, but he did not survive to prove this evolution in a poetic expression which would
expand and clarify. The influence of Hardy—clearly visible in his later War poems—is first apparent in “The River”, which depicts the “black inscrutability’ of the forces of nature; man can attain the strength that comes of unity” only by surrendering his mortal body to the “one great strength/That moves and can not die”.¹⁰

His pessimistic approaches are also visible in the poem entitled “Rooks” in which Sorley deals with the haunting transience and mystery of life:” we would live on, these birds and I, he cries:

“Yet how? Since everything must pass

At evening with the sinking sun,

And Christ is gone, and Barabbas,

Judas and Jesus, gone, clean gone,

Then how shall I live on?”

*(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll. 1-5)*

The extreme question in Sorley’s conscience is of the complexity and subtlety of his spirituality. Sorley in these lines realises the facts of the existence. In his point of spiritual questioning he arrives at the conclusion that once life has come into existence it has to end sooner or later, this is the only reality of life. In his opinion everything has to pass from
this world as is evident from the image of “evening with the sinking sun’, ‘And Christ is gone, and Barabbas’. Here Sorley seems to be influenced by the younger generation of the Romantics. This approach of transience vs. permanence seems to be due to the influence of Keats.

Sorley’s reaction to the War comes out most clearly in the octet of his sonnet “To Germany”:

“You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.
But gropers both through fields of thought confined
We stumble and we do not understand.
You only saw your future bigly planned
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,
And in each other’s dearest ways we stand,
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind”.

(CP. ll. 1-9)

These lines display the meditative and brooding strain in Sorley’s temperament. He demonstrates here an understanding of the historical significance of the crisis which was unique among the younger War poets of the First World War. Sorley valued his experiences in Germany and tried to account for
the human failures that lay behind the false attitude of the patriotic enmity. He could measure the depths of a tragedy which Brooke ignored. The spare, monosyllabic diction of ‘To Germany’ is characteristic of Sorley’s nature of thought and expression. His blunt, economical use of vocabulary directly contrasts with Brooke’s aureate use of phrases.

Whereas “To Germany” exhibits the meditative and contemplative nature of Sorley another poem entitled “All the hills and vales along” written about the same time subscribes to the harsher, more savage impulses which animated him:

“All the hills and vales along
Earth is bursting into song,
And the singers are the chaps
Who are going to die perhaps.

O sing marching men,
Till the valleys ring again.

Give your gladness no earth’s keeping,
So be glad, when you are sleeping.”

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll. 1-8)

These lines once again show the mounting tension of the war situation in the mind of the poet. Sorley is prophesying the possible destruction awaiting in the front life. The aggravating
situation of the war-front forces him to foresee the possible catastrophic condition ahead in the life of the soldiers, hence the human loss. This also shows the prevalent mood of Sorley in most of his poems. He is speculative, contemplative and brooding over the future happenings. This poem is one of the most bitter-tasting marching songs ever written in the history of the War. It insists on the apartness of the earth from men’s sufferings and death, and yet its oneness with them in their fate. He is trying to trace out the myths of life. This poem embodies the opposition between the human capacity of emotion, thought and action.

According to John H. Johnston “Sorley’s irony”, however, “reaches far beyond Housman’s sardonic rejection of intellectual responsibility.” We could find here an echo of A. E. Housman’s concept of Nature as hostile and indifferent to man:

“Earth that never doubts nor fears,
Earth that knows of death, not tears,
Earth that bore with joyful ease
Hemlock for Socrates,
Earth that blossomed and was glad
‘Neath the cross that Christ had,
Shall rejoice and blossom too
When the bullet reaches you”.

(M & O P, ll.1-8)

This poem has some similarities with Grenfell’s “Into Battle”, but it is a darker, more ironical poem. Sorley’s War experience made him sure of his pre-war doubts which he had about the war. His criticism of Brooke is less than that of the culture which fostered him. As John Press says:

“Life and literary criticism would be much simpler if human beings were less complex and unpredictable: the writings of Sorley during the four and a half months left to him after he had landed in France display an attitude of mind that is, if not contradictory, at least highly ambiguous.”

But in Sorley’s poetry there is no dearth of those elements which enjoyed self-sacrifice, courage and devotion to duty. The poems inspired by such values are the product of his thoughtful maturity. Given the incapability of irony or ambivalence in Georgian poetry, Sorley manages both an emotional association with its singers and an ironic reserve that evokes the tragic concern of their song. To put it in the words of John H. Johnston, the final stanza of “All the hills
and vales along”, “echoes the very rhythm of men, whose intensified physical life and movement correspond briefly to the vitality present in the natural world”.12

“From the hills and valleys earth
Shouts back the sounds of mirth,
Tramp of feet and lilt of song
Ringing all the road along.
All the music of their going,
Ringing swinging glad song -throwing,
Earth will echo still, when foot
Lies numb and voice mute.
On marching men, on
To the gates of death with song.
Sow your gladness for earth’s reaping,
So you may be glad, though sleeping.
Strew your gladness on earth’s bed,
So be merry, so be dead.”

( Marlborough and Other Poems, ll.31-44)

Sorley here tries to well-knit his recurring reminders of death throughout the moments measuring a marching song. He combines, in these lines, the pathos of youthful vitality with the irony of its swift extinction. There is also an absence of
inspirational appeal, the celebration of the visible virtues and romantic self-contemplation. These lines give the image as if the soldier themselves are peering into their painful predicaments on the path of death. They know that they are going into the lap of death. Sorley visualizes the conflict as a catastrophi human tsunami. Sorley’s imagery suggests that frustration, bewilderment and anguish which is clearly seen in later phase of the First World War Poetry.

The “Two Sonnets” of Sorley on death corresponds to the serious implications of elegiac tone. In the first of the “Two Sonnets”, Sorley voices the myriads who are destined to die. The undercurrent implications of prophetic imagination seem to constitute the sheer mass of humanity that the war could swallow. As John H. Johnston rightly points out, “Against the enormity of this sacrifice and its meaningless inevitability he envisions a hereafter completely stripped off conventional spiritual comforts”13. This aspect could well be seen in the following lines:

“Saints have adored the lofty souls of you.
Poets have whitened at your high renown.
We stand among the many millions who
Do hourly wait to pass your pathway down.

156
You, so familiar, once were strange: we tried
To live as of your presence unaware.
But now in every road on every side
We see your straight and steadfast signpost there.
I think it like that signpost in my land,
Hoary and tall, which pointed me to go
Upward into the hills, on the right hand,
Where the mists swim and the winds shriek and
Blow,
A homeless land and friendless, but a land
I did not know and that I wished to know.”

(Marlborough and Other Poems, ll.1-14)

The poet visualizes ‘Death’ which brings no hope of consolation. There are hopelessness, bleakness and loneliness in a land far from the life hereafter. In the poet’s opinion the ‘steadfast signpost” is discovering the truth behind the illusions created by religion and the imagination. In the sonnet Sorley voices on behalf of the millions who are doomed to die. He unfolds his coldly stoic attitude, an attitude that is elaborated in the second sonnet. In this sonnet (Second of the “Two Sonnets”) the bitterness of the truth is implied but can easily be discerned:
“Such, such is Death; no triumph: no defeat:
   Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean,
   A merciful putting away of what has been.
   And this we know: Death is not Life effete,
   Life crushed, the broken pai. We who have seen
   So marvelous things know well the end not yet…”

(M&OP,ll.6)

Unlike Brooke, death for Sorley is not a transformation into ‘a white unbroken glory’ but a complete and final departure from all aspects of physical life, ‘a slate rubbed clean, a merciful putting away of what has been’. So far as his language is concerned, Sorley projects his own vision of death: “We who have seen/so marvellous things know well the end not yet.” As the War swallows millions, conventionally ‘poetic ideas of spiritual survival and compensation enshrines a mockery of death.

Sorley is considered to be the first of the War poets who perceived the nature of warfare making it “easy to be dead”. The conflict subscribing merely on “human attrition the loss of life bore a sacrificial aspect that could not longer be treated in conventional elegiac terms”.14 His last three sonnets present his own version of death, and they provide a perfect
opportunity to express idea and vision present in his attitude. De Sola Pinto’s *Crisis in English Poetry* argues that Sorley broke away from the conventionally ‘heroic’ attitude of Brooke and Grenfell:

“The poems that [Sorley] wrote in the last years of his life express new attitude to the war which are 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”\(^\text{15}\)

It is with Sorley’s verse that the tendencies of the First World War poetry reveals themselves. Sorley exhibited intellectual and imaginative powers that directed those attitudes. Hence, though his poems are few in number, Sorley could have established himself as a poet of the Great War with honour and respect. To conclude it would be appropriate to quote Hazel Powell to get the exact picture of Sorley: “Sorley is of particular interest because he was writing at the beginning of the War, yet his poems show a maturity of outlook and a realism which was out of step with most of the other poets of the time.”\(^\text{16}\)
References


2. *Ibid*, p.14


5. *Ibid*, p. 55


7. *Ibid*, p. 57

8. *Ibid*, p. 58

9. *Ibid*, p. 69


11. *Ibid*, p. 62

12. *Ibid*, p. 61

13. *Ibid*, p. 66

14. *Ibid*, p. 69
