CHAPTER V

Edmund Charles Blunden
(1896-1974)
When the war began, Blunden was of about eighteen years old. He was born in Yalding, Kent. He attended Christ’s Hospital London. Edmund Charles Blunden joined army in 1914 and experienced war in the trenches. He served with the Royal Sussex Regiment from 1915 and fought on the Somme. He wrote a number of poems, his poems such as “Third Ypres” and “Report on Experience” may be cited as representative examples of his war poetry. In these poems he not only recalls his war experiences but also expresses his sense of guilt for not attaining martyrdom, which is a dominant theme in his poetry. His poems are deeply moving and constitute the characteristic of the man and his attitude to the War. His best-known work “Undertones of War” describes the double destruction of man and Nature. His longing for the fragrance of ancient peace is described in a beautiful manner. He gives a brilliant description of his war experiences in his book Undertones of War. In this prose work he beautifully sums up
his experiences of War. His account of the Somme battle is perhaps most impressive and memorable for the reason that it gives true account of the chaos and confusion shared by those who took part in the War.

Although the verse of Blunden certainly embodies something of the physical and spiritual distress that informs Sassoon’s productions, his range of visualization is much wider and his imagination is not as obsessed with the crude details of suffering and death. His poetry is not inspired by any purposefully creative intent, nor is limited by the motives and techniques of disillusion. His eye ranges freely over the phenomena of war; he discovers poetry in the ravaged landscape. His poetry portrays homes and deserted farms. Like Sassoon, Blunden also finds poetry in the trenches and in the moral and physical cries of personal experience. His lyrical responses are more sensitive, more varied and more controlled than those of Sassoon. His emotional reactions are not predetermined by a strongly negative attitude but emerge spontaneously as a significant element of his depictions.

Blunden’s war verse dates from the spring of 1916, when he experienced his first period of service in the trenches. By this time romantic idealism had nearly spent itself as a motivating
force for poetry, except for a final resurgence just before the Somme battles. Blunden entered the war too late to be affected by its influence so deeply. Though rather young and romantic in his own fashion, he made development as a nature poet to echo his own response.

Blunden’s verse deals with the disagreeable realities of the war. The poet sees the harmonies and beauties of nature, as well as the productions of man’s patient industry destroyed or defaced by the inhuman mechanism of war, the result is an alien and sinister world which he can discern only from pathetic vestiges of normality. Thus, Blunden found most of his poetry neither in a baseless idealism nor in purposive realism, but in a humanely aesthetic sense of desecration. He is not merely a nature poet of the war; his unflinching eye and strength of phrase can cope with the most appalling of scenes.

The most characteristic qualities of Blunden’s poetry are derived from the themes and traditions of eighteenth–century pastoral loves. His delight in simple observation, his evocation of a wide range of rural scenes, his sensitivity to the rhythms and harmonies of nature—all these indicate his close relationship with Thomson, Young, Collins, Cowper and Clare. It is John Clare, however, Blunden admires most; he is “in
some lights the best poet of Nature that this country and for all I know any other country ever produced”. Blunden’s description of war and reflective lyricism rank him with the best inspired by the War. An analysis of his war poems will show how he maintained his ability to see things responsively.

In “The Zonnebeke Road” the poet vividly evokes the oppression and anguish that inform the landscape by objectifying his feelings in the details of his description:

“Look, how the snow-dust whisks along the road,
Piteous and silly; the stones themselves must flinch
   In this east wind; the low sky like a load
Hangs over—a dead-weight. But what a pain
   Must gnaw where its clay cheek
Crushes the shell-chopped trees that fang the plain-
The ice-bound throat gulps out a gargoyle shriek.
   The wretched wire before the village line
Rattles like rusty brambles or dead bine,
   And then the daylight oozes into dun;
Black pillars, those are trees where roadways run.”

(CP, ll. 21-31)
In these lines the poet is specially responsive to the sinister and malignant aspects of the frontline war. But he seeks effects of a different order than those of simple physical horror. The poet is shocked and astonished at nature of the war which has caused so much destruction. He is pointing out on the condition of the frontline scenario. There is a graphic reproduction of an imaginative enlargement of the scene. He transforms the details into an ordered and poetically significant whole.

In another poem “Third Ypres” Blunden expresses a modern battle narrative in verse and contrast it to the heroic poem. This poem is powerful evocation of anguish and horror. This poem opens with a reference to the rising sun; the poet then goes on to depict the half-incredulous anticipation of victory among those who have survived the first day of the battle:

“Triumph! How strange, how strong had triumph come
One weary hate of soul and endless war
When from its grey gravecloths awoke anew
The summer day. Among the tumbled wreck
Of fascinated lines and mounds the light was
Peering,
Half- smiling upon us and our new found pride,
The terror of the waiting night outlived,
The time too crowded for the heart to count
All the sharp cost in friends killed on the assault.

No hook of all the octopus had held us,
Here stood we trampling down the ancient tyrant.
So shouting dug we among the monstrous pits.”

(CP, ll. 1-12)

These lines are generalized in perception relating to the progress of the battle as a whole. The poet registers not only his reactions to the condition but also to the moods and emotions of his fellow soldiers. These emotions begin to waver between doubt and joy as an unnatural silence settling over the battlefield. As the next lines of the same poem elaborates:

Amazing quite fell upon the waste,
Quite intolerable to those who felt
The hurrying batteries beyond the masking hills
For their new parley setting themselves in array
In crafty fourms unmapped
    Faith,
    Are dumb for the reason of their overthrow.
They move not back, they lie among the crews
Twisted and choked, they’ll never speak again.
Only the copse where once might stand a shrine
Still clacked and suddenly hissed its bullets by.
The war would end; the Line was on the move,
And a bound the impassable was passed.
We lay and waited with extravagant joy.”

(CP, ll. 13-26)

As the day progresses it is apparent that this joy is ill-founded; no word comes back from the first wave of infantry. The rain begins; and the German artillery resumes firing. At this point the narrator speaks for the first time in his own person:

“And you
Poor signaler, you I passed by this emplacement,
You whom I warned, poor daredevil, waving your flags…”

Here the sensibility of the poet as an individual begins to take over; the narrative does not lose its chronological progression. As an observer the poet visualizes the progress of the battle and the hopes and fears of those who are engaged in it. These lines also depict the personal sufferings due to the war. This poem ends in an abrupt and inconclusive fashion. In the following lines the poet comes to a frantic call for aid:

“For God’s sake send and help us,
Here in a gunpit, all headquarters done for,
Forty or more, the nine-inch came right through,
All splashed with arms and legs, and I myself
The only one not killed, not even wounded.

You’ll send—God bless you!”

(CP, ll. 116-21)

There is helplessness on the part of the speaker. He is helpless due to the unbearable condition of the warfront. He needs help for his fellow soldiers and for himself. In these lines Blunden produced some of the most effective poetry of the Great War. Blunden’s “Third Ypres” “vividly conveys the feeling of helplessness which many felt by the end of the year as the war dragged on in a seemingly timeless way. It was as if it had a life of its own”.²

In “Preparation for Victory” also the poet is saddened with the future prospects of the war. In his view the prolonging war is senseless. It has got no end at all. At one point the speaker hopes for his capability to do something good as he can. But the inner conscience of the poet is saddened with the negative hope.
As is evident in the following lines:

“I’ll do my best’, the soul makes sad reply,
And I will mark the yet unmurdered tree,
The tokens of dear homes that court the eye,
And yet I see them not as I would see.
Hovering between, a ghostly enemy.
Sickens the light, and poisoned, withered, wan,
The least defiled turns desperate to me,
The body, poor unpitied Caliban,
Patches and sweats and grunts to win the name of Man.”

(CP, ll. 10-18)

These lines speak of the truth of the warfare. The speaker is complaining of the human predicament. The war has left only the destroyed trees and human bodies. They are lying dead unnoticed. The enemy has poisoned the hope and all aspirations. The scene of the warfront saddens the poet and makes his heart sick because this war has caused a lot of destruction.

Blunden’s descriptions of the war experiences are a live testimony of a soldier who saw the gun battle going on in front of his eyes. He has his own way of explaining his war experiences. His war poetry is a real expression of the
contemporary situation he witnessed. As a contrast to the other poets of the period defining typical situations in a typical manner. His ‘realism’ in expressing the war details affect the whole of our mind.

In “Come on, My Lucky Lads” the poet has given an excellent description of the warfront in the following lines:

“O rosy red, O torrent splendour
Staining all the Orient gloom,
O celestial work of wonder-
A million mornings in one bloom!...

(CP,ll. 1-4)

Though the poet is expressing the wonder of the flower but undertones of these lines are paradoxical. According to the poet rose is beautiful and splendid. It’s a great creation of the Nature. In one single morning millions of flowers bloom. The paradox here is that as rose is great and blooms in the garden in a large quantity at a time; in a similar manner human beings are also the greatest creation of the Nature. But instead of blooming human lives are being dragged into the catastrophic situation. Thousands and thousands of human lives are killed and perished every day for no reasons. It’s a
pity on the part of the poet. He feels heart ache. It is a matter of concern for him and for the entire humanity.

Within the range of his response to the Great War, Blunden produced some of the most effective of the War Poetry. “Although his characteristic work deals with the disruption of harmony in the world of nature and civilized order”\(^3\), he sometimes dramatically captures the overwhelming sense of pity that distinguishes the verse of Owen. “It’s plain we were born for this, naught else”, writes Blunden in “Zero”; but this bleak sense of necessity magnifies the consciousness of individual suffering to unbearable proportions in “Trench Raid near Hooge”. The decorous literary image in the first stanza evokes a contrast between the conventional- but somehow reassuring poetic visualization of dawn and the brutal reality of pre-dawn bombardment:

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\text{At an hour before the rosy-fingered}
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\text{Morning should come}
\]
\[
\text{To wonder again what meant these sties,}
\]
\[
\text{These wailing shots, these glaring eyes,}
\]
\[
\text{These moping mum,}
\]
\[
\text{Through the black reached strange long rosy fingers}
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All at one aim protending, and bending: down they swept,

Successions of similars after leapt

And bore red flame.”

(CP, ll. 1-11)

These lines not only present the mere physical effects of the war but it is also important in terms of its tragic effect and its shattering psychological implications. As John H. Johnston rightly puts it as, “The ‘fierce truth’ of war can be captured only when these effects achieve some kind of extension in the soul of the poet who is capable of interpreting his own and others’ sufferings in the light of tragic experience.”

Blunden’s sensitivity to suffering is often independent of his own ordeals and exposures to hazard. It is a record of his experience of the pity of war. His experience of war is traumatic amid the havoc wrought by the war.

Similarly in “Concert Party: Busseboom”, he portrays:

“To his new concert, white we stood;

Cold certainly held our breath;

While men in the tunnels below Larch Wood

Were kicking men to death.”

( CP, ll. 1-4)
Here the description is of the high spirits induced by a soldier’s entertainment, however, it chills the heart of the departing audience. These lines portray the sympathetically imaginative yet realistic perceptions of the poet. By and large, Blunden is almost pathetic in most of his poems which clearly indicate the trauma of the situation.

If we go deep into the writings of Blunden we would find that there is no satire in his poems. His occasional irony is employed only to enforce the impact of some meaningful contrast. Blunden is the most lighthearted of the World War I poets; yet the strain of the war seems to have affected his consciousness nearly as much as it affected Sassoon’s. Several post-war poems, testify to a sense of artistic debility and evince a haunted state of mind.

In “1916 Seen From 1921”, Blunden portrays himself as troubled by vivid memories and the “lost intensities” of emotions he could not do away with:

“Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughters, murmurings of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear;
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,

On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags...”

In this poem the poet seems to be tired of the effects of the war. The poet is hopeless and disheartened. There is despair and hopelessness on the part of the poet. The aggravating situation of the war has so much frustrated the poet that he has grown old before time. The treacherous war has broken all his hopes and aspirations. The poem depicts an image of a man full of despair.

The calm sense of an interrupted poetic vocation is perhaps Blunden’s chief asset. Within the range of the brief depiction the poet has developed a response that captured the larger disharmonies behind the crude and confusing data of warfare. The poet is in the awareness of the pity of suffering and death. He occasionally brings a perception of the tragic necessity of the war evils.

In the “Two Voices” the poet says:

“Now far withdraws the roaring night
Which wrecked our flower after the first
Of those two voices; misty light
Shrouds Thiepval Wood and all its worst;
But still ‘There’s something in the air’ I hear,

And still ‘We’re going South, man’ deadly near.”

These lines describe the poet’s description of the horrible condition of the war. The poet is depressed with the outraged condition of wrecked flower. There is destruction on all corners of life. Because of the war nature has also been destroyed. He has a sense of apprehension that something more dastardly may happen resulting in the innumerable loss of human lives and nature.

In the final stanza of “Come on My Lucky Lads” the blood shed and the booming sounds of the bomb disturbs the poet. He becomes a victim of nihilism. He measures life as an entity of death and decay:

“The swooning white of him, and that red!

These bombs in boxes, the craunch of shells,

The second-hand fitting round; ahead!

It’s plain we were born for this, naught else.”

(CP, ll.25-28)

Here the poet realizes the meaninglessness of life and this world. He seems to be disgusted and disjointed with the current war scenario. He is in the pitiable condition. Because
war has taken him into a world where there is no hope but only hopelessness. The imagery of 1 around destruction has taken him for the first time in no man’s land. According to him the war is being fought for no reasons. The irony of the situation is that though the human beings are the greatest creation of the Nature still in the most dangerous condition. The human beings which should enjoy the highest spirit of the universe have been dragged into the state of destruction and catastrophe.

In another description of war the poet says:

“How unpurposed, how inconsequential
Seemed those southern lines when in the parlor
Of the dying winter
First we went there!”

\( (CP, \text{ll. 1-4}) \)

Through his deeper thoughts and speculations war is simply an absorption into the unknown. The implication of these lines speaks out against the main tendencies of the war and a series of violent actions. To the poet war seems to be useless and unwarranted. The poet exposes the unexpected realism and concerns of survival. He is trying to defy the inhuman
circumstances of the war itself. As Paul Fussell rightly points out, Blunden’s “vision of nature is always ravaged in human terms and images indicates what his gentle heart has been attentive to all the while.”

To conclude it may be said that Blunden goes on the razor’s edge of loss, despair and hopelessness due to the war effects. He is not violent as Sassoon but the way he expresses the realities of the warfront is a tireless effort on his part to convey the message of his frustration and discussed. He seems to be in need of an answer of the present scenario. In brief, his poetry is full of war time frustration ultimately taking him into the world of existentialist view of the human predicament.
References


3. Ibid, p. 147

4. Ibid, p. 148