CHAPTER – IV

Rupert Chawner Brooke
(1887-1915)

&

Charles Hamilton Sorley
(1895-1915)
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 up 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”. 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." 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”.

“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,II.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.”

(HP, 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!”

(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:

"Their not to reason why
Their 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 realizes 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 spokesmanship 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,II.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".10

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..."\textsuperscript{11}

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.”

(\textit{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


9. Ibid, p. 132


11. Ibid, P. 55