

WAR POETS

Poetry is always conditioned by social reality, and however it may be defined as an illusion, it remains an expression of the poet's experience of life, sad or sweet, as a social being. This is found to be the basic truth of poetry in all ages. Of the social reality of the modern time, war is certainly an important, unfortunate and yet inevitable affair. It is a catalyzing agent, hastening an inviolable process of division and compounding. Yet, it is much more, for the passion aroused by it has different expressions. These divergent passions, roused by war, are seen in the poems, written during the First World War of 1914 and 1918. The poems on the World War I indicate a clash of principles, a strife of ideals, an effort for understanding and a keenness for the realization of a stability in a social order.

The war poets who flourished under the impact of the World War I, are found to indicate a change from Georgian romanticism. Of course, romanticism remains in war poetry, particularly in some war-poets, but this is somewhat different from what is perceived in Georgian poetry, in its freshness and intensity. Of course, there are some other war-poets who are found to deal with the grim reality of war and to knock at human mind that nothing is romantic or grand in war.

Among the war poets, the first name to be recognized is *Rupert Brooke*. He was a soldier-poet, but he died so early in the grim business of war, that he had but a little knowledge of or concerned with it. Naturally, his war poems are romantically inspired, full of patriotic sentiments. His five '*War Sonnets*', which included '*The Soldier*', appeared in *New Numbers* early in 1915. The ecstatic reception they received made him the nation's poet of war, a reputation further enhanced by the posthumous publication of '*1914 and Other Poems*' in 1915. He is also valued for his highly accomplished lighter verse, such as '*The Old Vicarage*,

Granchester and *Heaven*. His sonnet-series indicates clearly his romantic, idealistic view of war. The war poet in Rupert Brooke is essentially patriotic – rather excessively nationalistic. His poetry echoes his complacent view of war, as a noble ordeal, for the preservation of English honour and for the cause of justice and peace. This is distinctly echoed in his celebrated sonnet *The Soldier*. The same idealistic note marks his another sonnet *Peace*. The romantic zeal of Brooke's war poems is found continued in the patriotic war-verses of *John Freeman*, *W.N.Hodgson*, *Julian Grenfell*, *J.E. Flecker* and *Lawrence Binyon*. Lawrence Binyon's war poetry strikes the similar note to idealize war. His memorable poem *For the Fallen* is a grand tribute to the soldier's heroism. Julian Grenfell's poem *Into Battle* is a memorable idealization of war in a romantic vein.

But the horrors of the trench war-fare seems to have given rise to much more excellent works from the realist-poets of war. Here the romantic outlook is dispelled by a hard realistic attitude. Poetry becomes the expression of grim horror and the poignant truth that the war unfolds. Of these realist war-poets, *Wilfred Owen* must be mentioned as the most vital name. He is regarded as the greatest war poet of the First World War. The subject-matter of his poetry, as he himself records, is war and the pity of war. Only five of his poems were published in his lifetime. His bleak realism, his energy and indignation, his compassion, and his high technical skills are evident in most of his work. Owen wrote, nearly a score of poems. His remarkable poems are *Exposure*, *The Send Off*, *Greater Love*, *Insensibility*, *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, *Asleep*, *Futility*, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, *Miners*, *Spring Offensive* and *the Strange Meeting*. His invention and application of the para-rhyme in his war-poems to create a situation of 'remoteness, darkness, emptiness and shock' is of much significance and influence on subsequent poets, particularly the poets of thirties.

Siegfried Sassoon, also in his verses, presents the powerful revelation of the naked horror of war. He seems more violent that

Owen in his delineation of the horror of the front. His poetry contains a good deal of sarcasm and bitter irony and has not the positive message of Owen's. In 1917 he published his war poems in *The Old Huntsman* and in 1918 further poems in *Counter Attack*. Another realistic painter of the horror of war is *Isaac Rosenberg*, who, too, died quite young, like Owen, on the front. There is a considerable frankness in his scenes of the front, without the severity of Sassoon's irony and sarcasm. His *Collected Poems*, edited by Gordon Bottomly, was published posthumously in 1922.

Of other war poets, *E.W. Tennant*, *Francis Hedwidge*, *Gibson* and *Robert Nichols* may be quoted. Some of them follow the realistic tradition, set up by Owen and Sassoon. But some of them also have a share in the romantic note of Rupert Brooke, and mingle the reality of the horror of war with the romance of the victory and the thrill of patriotic services.

Indeed, the hard reality of the dreadful war is found to have a significant literary impact to rouse, in particular, poetic passions in diverse ways. The soldier-poets, produced under this impact, are many. Some of them, despite their contrary view-points of war, like Brooke and Owen, are endearing names in the English poetry of the twentieth century. What is more, war poetry signifies a distinct trend in English poetry to represent social reality and seems to satisfy Matthew Arnold's test of the 'high seriousness of poetry' as a social criticism.