

Vanity Fair: April, 1920

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Some Aspects of War Poetry in England

The Harrowing Battle of Poetry vs. Rhetoric

By SIEGFRIED SASSOON

I COULD easily have made a manifesto of this article. Perhaps my pen may get the better of me, even now. But I am beginning with a solemn resolution in favour of benevolent neutrality between (1) those poets who hated the Germans and didn't altogether disapprove of the war, and (2) those who hated the war and didn't altogether disapprove of the Germans. There is also a faintly professorial urbanity in the word "Aspects," which may reassure the reader who feared that he was about to witness an ungentelemanly scene in which patriarchal-patriots get their Britannia-metal-coloured beards pulled out in handfuls, while ruthless young soldier-satirists are patted on the back and hailed as reincarnations of Swift, Donne and Juvenal.

Not so. I shall merely attempt to give a rough outline of what the British poets did in the great war, making every allowance for the fact that they were writing under great difficulty, and that their self-expression was inevitably a matter of emotional occasions.

No poets could see straight in 1914. They could only strike attitudes and strive for effective gestures. In 1920 they are sitting around, mopping their brows and getting ready to begin all over again. And it is just as well to assume that they did their best to say what they believed to be fine and best-befitted for the moment. Those who hurled threats at the Kaiser can now turn their attention to strike-breaking and Bolshevik-baiting.

The war poetry of the Victorian period was consistent in that it was composed exclusively by civilians. "Soldier, I wish you well!" they cried, while the dominant strain was sounded by Tennyson, whose battle-pictures have only been equaled by exhibitors of cavalry-charges at the Royal Academy or wax-works at the Eden Musée. It is hard to believe that Tennyson would have written *The Charge of the Light Brigade* had he served in the Crimean trenches or taken an active part in suppressing the Indian Mutiny.

But from his horse-hair sofa in the Isle of Wight (with one eye on Windsor Castle), he did his job in style. He enjoyed writing about heroes, and his tradition was handed on (through the Boer war) to the poets of 1914. (Before continuing, I must confess that I have pulled a few hairs out of Tennyson's beard. But as he is not alive, it is not a real beard; only a legendary capillament of forty years ago.)

The first shot was fired by Kipling. When he shouted, "The Hun is at the gate!" he spoke with unimpeachable sincerity; but he failed to allay any apprehensions as to the immediate future of war poetry as a sublimated art. These grave doubts were fully justified. Practically the whole of the verse-writing civilian population of the British Isles took up the cry, and Northcliffe's *Times* printed sonnets, slogans, and elegies, for all it was worth. Such words as "banner," "crusade," "liberty," "chivalry," "clarion," "trumpet," "bugle" and "drum" were worked to death by the bards. The whole martial vocabulary of the Middle Ages was mobilized. In fact, every war-word was used—except those which were enjoying a blood-stained vogue among the armies on the Western Front. Belgium was snowed under by sympathetic sonneteers. Only the soldiers were silent. But not for long. Once they began, nothing could stop them. But in the early days they were not critical of the war; their thoughts were mainly reminiscent of the places where they had lived before they marched away. In the meantime, the home-birds were turning their attention to the Navy, mine-sweeping, submarines and other aquatic phenomena. And most of them loudly invoked vengeance on their enemies from the jealous tribal God who doesn't believe in Leagues of Nations. Even the most authoritative poets seemed to lose touch with their artistic integrity as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." They became the acknowledged purveyors of what the public wanted.

I HAVE quoted a phrase of Shelley's; but he was a man who did not believe in the argument of the mailed fist. "Poetry," he said, "redeems from decay the visitations of divinity in man." Rhetoric is never divine; and the patriotic poetry of the early stages of the European War was mainly rhetorical and falsely emotional. Poets hastily wrapped themselves in vicariously noble sentiments; or, if they had been listening to atrocity-fables (those ghoulis figures which have lurked on the outskirts of every up-to-date war), they scribbled Hymns of Hate in a fervour of righteous invective, and then trotted out to bed, priding themselves that, by Jingo, they'd settled the Kaiser once and for all!

It is good to remember the few poets who upheld the dignity of their glorious vocation. Masfield's *August, 1914*, was one of

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the isolated poems which survives as a worthy memorial of that period of catastrophe. Lascelles Abercrombie's *Lover in Wartime* was another fine poem, one which sounds a note of detachment from the national antagonisms and racial stampedings of the moment.

But now when all the world
Is monstrous with a crime,
Love, a great angel, stands
Gazing far beyond Time.

Later on, Laurence Binyon wrote several noble poems, of which the best known is *For the Fallen*.

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun in the morning,
We will remember them.

The Poet Laureate published little during the war. *Trafalgar Square* is probably his finest war-poem. But Bridges is a superb craftsman who cannot write things to order. Thomas Hardy, who is now taking his place as one of the supreme poets of the English language, maintained his customary philosophic aloofness. But underlying his war poems there was a comprehensive internationalism, a profound pity for humanity as a whole. His last word is always a reversion to simplicity and ageless wisdom.

Only a man harrowing clouds
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only a thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by;
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

What were the younger poets doing in 1914-15? Look in the War Anthologies and you will see that they found it almost impossible to avoid emotional heroics. Julian Grenfell expressed the "joy of battle," a sort of patrician *esprit de corps*, in his famous poem *Into Battle*. In addition to their "devotion to duty," young soldiers had the added satisfaction of knowing that they were cutting a fine figure, and they longed to put their feelings on record. . . . (I have been through those fine feelings myself, so I speak at least with the authority of disillusionment.) The poignant appeal which many of these poems

made was immensely increased when the author had definitely fallen in action. Premonitions of death were the order of the day; but such premonitions increased in number with the quantity of shells and other missiles which came over from the German lines.

It would be quite easy for me to produce some fine writing about the splendid young men who died in the war. But that sort of rhetoric was not appreciated in the trenches. The poets who wrote farewell sonnets did not talk in that strain to their companions. They were too busy.

THE name of Rupert Brooke has become a legend. His personality was a precious gift to all who knew him and his noble sonnets expressed the feeling of romantic patriotism with which men enlisted early in the war. Had he lived he would probably have interpreted other and different aspects of the international slaughter-house. The gift of delicate irony which flashes from his earlier poems is sufficient proof of that. I can imagine Brooke writing some of the bitterest satirical verse of the war. I can imagine him turning impatiently from the adulation of sentimentalists and crying, "If I should live, think only this of me, That I will tell you things you *won't* enjoy."

An equally impressive figure is that of Charles Sorley, who was killed at the Battle of Loos (in September, 1915), at the age of 20. Sorley's verse is by turns whimsical, austere, full of tenderness and an astonishingly matured wisdom. His work has been one of the strongest influences on the younger writers of the war; and, by all the auguries, he was a great poet killed on the threshold of his inheritance. His sonnet *To Germany* is now familiar to all lovers of poetry, but it can not be too often quoted:

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.
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,

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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.

Others who fell in action were Edward Thomas, Francis Ledwidge and Wilfred Owen. The first two are already well-known through their nature-poetry, and they wrote little that had a direct bearing on the war. But the exquisite work of Thomas is in the very first rank and it has not yet won adequate recognition. The war-poems of Wilfred Owen have, so far, only appeared in *Wheels*; 1919, the anthology of a group of writers with whom he had little in common. But when his collected poems appear he will take a high place among the soldiers who protested bitterly against the waste and brutality of war. He was killed on November 4, 1918, aged 24, and was awarded the Military Cross after his death.

Other soldier-poets of distinction are Richard Aldington, Frederic Manning, and Herbert Read, all of whom belong to the Imagist school of *vers libre* writers. These three are still very much alive and much may be expected of them, although Read (who won both

the D.S.C. and the M.C.) seems to have come under a slightly decadent influence since the war. Francis Brett-Young, who is also a gifted novelist, wrote some remarkable poems while serving in East Africa. He is one of the more conventional of the "Georgian" group.

Of my friends, Robert Graves and Robert Nichols, I write with diffidence. Nichols is well-known in America; his work has power and beauty. His recent poetry shows an ever-increasing richness and his future will be watched with profound interest. Of Robert Graves I find it impossible to write without bias. Serving in the same regiment with him, I shared a great part of his long experience of the trenches, and I leave it to others to analyze the delicate and fanciful verse in which he has expressed a whimsical temperament which has endeared him to all who know him.

Osbert Sitwell is another interesting figure. After serving at the front as an officer in the Grenadier Guards, he returned to England to write some of the bitterest and most brilliantly satirical verse of the war. Bourgeoisians, profiteers, and the smug *politesse* have been pilloried by him in the most ruthless fashion; and as a serious poet it is impossible to guess what he will do next.

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