Some First World War Poets

by Lisa Broadway

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

This Bookmark is an analysis of the varying ways in which the First World War poets expressed the experience of war, illustrating the varieties of public and private expression.

BOOKS TO READ

The Lost Voices of the First World War (Bloomsbury Press, 1988) ed. Tim Cross.
Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War (Ash Publication, 1987) ed. Jon Silkin
Men Who March Away (Heinemann, 1989) ed. I.M. Parsons.

Other anthologies and critical works mentioned in the notes, and of great interest to those who would like to gain a deeper appreciation of the poems of the Great War, are listed in Further Reading and Criticism.

NOTES

Poetry is primarily a highly personal form of expression. This becomes problematic during war-time when fear and despair suppress or discourage artistic creativity: As Isaac Rosenberg wrote to Laurence Binyon, 'I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poetry'. Once the full horror of the First World War became apparent it was inevitable that changes occurred not only in the experiences that were considered appropriate to poetry but also in the voice of the poet. One way of considering this voice is in terms of the claims placed upon it by public and private concerns.

Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Robert Graves all illustrate in their own ways the emphasis they placed on poetry as a public or private mode of expression.

Rupert Brooke

Rupert Brooke is the foremost example of the public poet of the early war period, insomuch as his poetry was not written in response to his direct personal experience but rather as a conduit to channel the jingoistic enthusiasm of 1914 society. Therefore his poetry assumes an air of contrivance, for it is not spontaneous but more of a calculated oratory expressing his generation's patriotic, naive perception of war. Such poets as Brooke and Julian Grenfell played a parasitic role as far as poetic creativity was concerned, for all the emotions implied in their poems were generated by the patriotic aspirations of the Nation. They wrote poetry by ear, not from the soul.

Thus in Brooke's most famous work, the sonnet '1914', an air of contrivance is created:

> If I should die think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is forever England

for these lines are the product of an imaginative preconception, void of any personal experience of death. Furthermore in 'The Dead, IV' from '1914' he illustrates the inexperienced and contrived perception of death as the ennobling consequence of war: how could he have possibly known that life and laughter flourish in the place after death?

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies,

The most eloquent proof of the effectiveness of Brooke's poetry as public statement is the extent to which it was exploited by politicians for patriotic purposes. They used Brooke's poems as a form of war propaganda, immortalizing him as the young warrior keen to lay down his life for his country. This reached its height following his death amidst nationwide mourning in Winston Churchill's broadcast eulogy, which hailed Brooke's poetry as a declamatory voice

A voice had become audible, a note had been struck, more true... more able to do justice to the nobility of our youth-in-arms... more able to express their thoughts...
Brooke's brash oratory was created from inexperience and ignorance concerning the harsh reality of war. However, as the disillusionment of war's reality emerged, different poetic voices began to be heard. These were fashioned from the shocking and bitter experiences of the battlefield and driven by anger at the hypocrisy that Brooke and his like had done so much to encourage. Their trademarks were the honest exposure of their wounded sensibilities and the expression of their need to make the truth public. Different poets approached this in different ways. In the work of Sassoon, Rosenberg and Owen there is a paradox, in that it is through the exposure of their private agonies that they make their most eloquent public statements. In speaking for themselves they spoke for all who had endured the agonies of war.

Wilfred Owen
Wilfred Owen is a case in point. In 'Dulce et Decorum Est'' he reinterprets the conventional patriotic sentiment in terms of the nightmare of the actual experience. Thus one is not given an inexperienced description of a Brooke-envisaged soldier dying in glory but rather a description of an actual victim of the war whose sufferings Owen had personally witnessed.

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.'

In addition Owen's attempts to preserve his own mental equilibrium combine his role as public and private poet, for in order to escape the feeling of his own unworthiness he used his poetry as an instrument to aid his fighting comrades by compelling the public (the reader) to share his pity and sense of responsibility for the soldier's torment. 'Futility' is another example of Owen's role as public/private poet. The poem begins in the grim aftermath of battle with the order to move the corpse. A private and individual experience of the waste of war and the irrevocability of death grows naturally into a consideration of how precious and vulnerable human life is. The futile hope of the poet to resuscitate his comrade by moving him into the sun symbolizes man's susceptibility on earth for, unlike plantlife, God's highest creation, man, cannot be brought to life by the cosmic power of the sun.

Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved - still warm - too hard to stir?'

The poem questions the worth of man's existence, for all that human life can do is destroy and be destroyed. Therefore would it not have been better if life had not been created at all?

O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?'

The poem is on a personal level, for within it Owen expresses his private sense of despair and pity for his fallen comrade. His frustration is illustrated in the ironic suggestiveness of the word ‘gently’ in the first stanza, for this loving care is useless and inappropriate in a situation where such compassion is of no benefit. This is Owen's counter blast to the bland patriotism of Brooke's corner of a foreign field.

Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Sassoon was more of a public poet than Owen insomuch as he is the paramount propagandist of the war poets. His colloquial style rendered his poems more accessible and understandable to the public. Indeed the anger and satirical bitterness in his poetry is directed precisely at the public and this is far more immediate that Owen's ‘pity’. However, that is not to say that Sassoon is not a private poet as well, for such rancour could not have been projected in his poetry had not Sassoon been painfully writing from within his own suffering.

Sassoon said that his poem ‘Blighters’ draws an analogy between music halls and the Houses of Parliament; Sassoon likens the latter to a music hall audience flippantly regarding the war as some form of comic entertainment.

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the show.''

He scorns their ignorance as they think of the marvellous work the tanks were doing in France, when in fact they were useless, stuck immobile in the mud:

We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks.'

Then Sassoon's mockery turns to vengeful anger, as he wishes that a tank would attack the Houses of Parliament:

I'd like to see a tank come down the stalls
...
And there'd be no more jokes in Music Halls
To mock the riddled corpses around Bapaume.

This poem could be seen superficially as an attack on the complacent civilians who visited music halls whilst soldiers met death in the trenches. Yet it is characteristic of Sassoon to attack his foes in a more vitriolic way, seeing the politicians as a drunken music hall audience.

Isaac Rosenberg

Isaac Rosenberg at times shares with Owen and Sassoon the rhetoric of the soldier in action, as illustrated in these lines from ‘Dead Man's Dump’:

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face

But his poems also contain elements of mystery and intimacy that suggest a complex of unresolved emotions. Thus in ‘Dead Man's Dump’ anger, impotence, sympathy, regret and even envy exist in tension with one another. In this poem he combines the emotions of anger

and compassion to achieve a response of helpless anger that he could not save the dying soldier, an anger which is softened by sympathy. One feels for the failed soldier-saviour more than for the dying man, who is now in a more peaceful world, while the failed rescuer is left to endure more traumatic incidents when life slips hopelessly away.

> His shook shoulders slipped their load
> But when they bent to look again
> The drowning soul was sunk too deep
> For human tenderness.

By arousing these diverse emotions in the reader (the public) the response is more profound.

Where Rosenberg differs from Owen and Sassoon is in his avoidance of a shrill rhetoric that tends to drown the private voice in a blast of moral outrage. Rosenberg's quieter voice allows the integrity of the private experience to speak for itself. The exquisitely crafted 'Break of Day in the Trenches' is a prime example of Rosenberg's poetic integrity. The poem opens naturally with the break of dawn, and immediately our attention is drawn to the portentous approach of death.

> It is the same old Druid tame as ever.

'Druid tame' is significant, as one can interpret this as the sacrifice of young men at some ancient ceremony.

> As I pull the parapet's poppy
> To stick behind my ear

symbolizes the closeness of death, as the position of the poppy is exactly where a bullet would enter if he were to lift his head above the parapet. But he does not raise his head, because in an environment of human destruction, the roles of man and rat are reversed. Man is now the hunted, and while he is hiding the rat commutes between the English and German lines with his new privilege of freedom. One can imagine the 'queer, sardonic rat' smiling with a vengeful ridicule as it crawls over the rotten bodies of its former hunters who are now

> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
> The torn fields of France.

It is the poet's ordering of the factors of the immediate situation which voices the effects of war, and this consequently speaks louder than any bitter condemnation by a poet.

Robert Graves

Robert Graves is the most private of the poets in this selection. He attempts a complete sublimation of the war experience; therefore the war is not treated as a public event. Graves found it psychologically impossible to direct his poetry at anyone other than himself. Thus his work entails a man's private quest to unearth poetically the implications of war. His poem 'Assault Heroic' illustrates his personal need to escape from the war through his poetry. It avoids any description of war's brutalities, but rather provides a metaphor for the conflict in children's antics. Thus the soldier in the poem falls asleep and wakes up in the dream world of a mediaeval setting. Behind their castle walls his enemies laugh and jeer at him just like young children. In retaliation he confronts them just as childishly with his'sharp tongue-like sword', and thus, as in a child's imagination, he is able magically to transform his enemies' weapons of stones and boiling oil into lumps of gold and a shower of dew.

The stones they cast I caught
And alchemized them with thought.

It is Graves's imaginary self, indestructible thanks to his poetic ability to change potentially lethal elements into harmless ones, which holds the key to his psychological survival: he is protecting himself from his actual fear of death in the real war.

READING AND FURTHER CRITICISM

Additional anthologies of Great War poetry:

Siegfried Sassoon: War poems, ed. R. Hart-Davies (Faber, 1983)
Up the Line to Death, ed. Brian Gardner (Methuen. 1986)
The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry, ed. Jon Silkin (Penguin, 1989)
Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Galaxy, 1982)
Dominic Hibberd, *Owen, The Poet* (Macmillan, 1989)
Michael Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (Athlone Press, 1969)
Geoffrey Matthews, *Brooke and Owen* (Stand IV, No 3, l960)
J. Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg, Poet and Painter* (C & A Woolf, 1975)

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