

Post War Disillusionment and English Poetry

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The long shadows of two world wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 lay across the 20th Century. The political consequences of the I World war were Communism in Russia and as a reaction against this, Totalitarianism in Germany and Italy. The Second World war split the world into two blocks- the East dominated by Russia and the West by America.

The period between the two World wars offered the sharpest possible contrast to the serenity and complacency of the Victorian Era. The wars came as terrific shock to the society. The brutality of the extensive devastation of life and values led to "Sense of desolation, uncertainty, futility, the groundlessness of aspiration of the vanity of endeavor and a thirst for a life giving water which seems suddenly have failed" as it was clearly reflected by T.S.Eliot in his notes on 'The Waste Land'.

The established values totally broke down in the Post War period. Attempts were being made to search new values in Political thought, Psychology and Humanity. The society was in a state of degradation and poetry could become a true criticism only when it tried to express the horror and complexities of such a world. Contemporary criticism is strangely divided in the matter of its judgment on post war poetry. There are some who raise the modernist adventurers in English poetry to the heavens and hail them as the harbingers of a greater era of poetry, while there are others who cry them down as nothing more than pretentious mediocrities undeservedly much made of. The poets who had experienced the horrors of the two World wars were deeply influenced by the disillusionment and frustration. They attempted to show the reality as it was and continued their endeavor to search the values in their poetry.

C. D. Lewis, one of the younger poets, says, succinctly summing the situation:

".....Then came for poetry, in spite of Hardy and de la Mare, a period of very low vitality. The Georgian poets, a sadly pedestrian rabble, flocked along the roads their fathers had built, pointing out to each other the beauty spots...The winds blew, the floods came...one only rode the whirl wind: Wilfred Owen killed on the Sambre, spoke above the barrage and the gas cloud. The poetry is in the pity. When it was all over it was given to an American, T. S. Eliot, to pick up some of the fragments of civilization, place them end to end, and on that crazy pavement walk precariously through the waste-land. Postwar poetry was born amongst the ruins. Its immediate ancestors are Hopkins, Owen and Eliot and Yeats, the last in the aristocratic tradition, remains the most admired among living writers...a lesson to us in integrity."

The wars saw an outburst of poetry. Some poets at their initial stages expressed the patriotic fervor and heralded the romantic concept of war. The Glorification of the nationalism, patriotism, freedom, liberty and martyrdom were to be seen at this stage. But as the bloodshed grew more appalling, the poets realized the reality and tried to shatter the illusion of the splendor of war by frankly projecting the realistic and devastating picture of the agony, suffering, brutality and futility of the war. They were aware of the fact that the values of the old cultivated middle class were dead beyond to recall and that it was necessary to find expression for a new sort of sensibility.

The classification of poetry, as Pre War and Post War with reference to chronological sequence is only a matter of convenience. The process of evolution in literature is one and continuous, taking colour from the environments of a particular period, and shaped or misshaped by influences to which it may be subjected.

The Georgian poets, the War poets, and the Imagist movement which was started just before the War, have all had their due share of influence in moulding the postwar poetic consciousness, and expression. The Georgians escaped into other worlds of experience with a reflex criticism implied of the existing scheme of things.

Walter de la Mare slipped into the world of childhood and extra mundane forms. Sturge Moore took refuge into other ages, the Greek, the Jewish, the Persian, peculiarly perverting the sympathies of Keats or Tennyson and siding with the defeated or lost causes. Others like Rupert Brooke, rejecting modern life, tried to found a new world on the ruins of the old in which they no longer believed. Then there were others like Wilfred Gibson, John Masefield and John Drinkwater who accepted whatever good they could find in existence and strove with the stuff of life to show of what it is made and to show to what high purposes it could be turned. Lastly there were a few other poets who could give acceptance, limited, yet definite, to contemporary intellectual and spiritual movements. Alfred Noyes represented this attitude completely and saw in the earlier glories of his country or in the career of science, a basis for the future like of mankind. All this negation, this disillusionment, this struggle, this partial acceptance, seemed, however, hardly productive of great poetry. The Imagists, then, came and charged the Georgians with flat failure and attributed their ineffectiveness to their persistence in the use of a language and imagery that had become hopelessly out of date, a circumstance which put them at one remove from the actualities of their own time. The Imagists, therefore, in direct opposition to the Georgians, set up altogether new models for poetry when they defined a poem as an image or a succession of images and an image as that which presents an intellectual or emotional complex in an instant of time. Such a conception of the subject matter of poetry to be expressed in the manner of the French Symbolists by way of association and suggestion gave birth to a strangely new kind of poetry. Started as it was on an essential misconception as to the fundamental basis of poetry, the movement, by 1917 was completely dead as a force in the literary world. But it had a profound influence upon the postwar poetry as a whole in its spirit of adventure and audacity in flying into the face of tradition and convention. It was in fact the first literary movement, to mark a complete revolt against Victorian tradition and its pale imitators, the Georgians. Then it was that the Georgians by their alleged default or inability to respond to the needs of the time, and the Imagists by their spirit of defiance and experiment supplied the postwar poetry with the necessary stimulus in its start on a career of further experiment and greater and more accentuated defiance and rejection of conventional standards.

Charles Hamilton Sorley, Siegfried Sassoon, T.S.Eliot, Miss Edith Sitwell, W.H.Auden, C.Day Lewis, Mac Neice, Stephen Spender, Lehman and other poets have written about the agony, suffering, brutality and the futility of the wars. Some of them have also tried to find the remedy for the problem.

Charles Hamilton Sorley- His poems express new attitudes to the wars which were different from the poems written glorifying the war. These poems express the attitude of men who have known the horror and boredom of modern warfare, sense of aimlessness and frustration, a consciousness of being a part of a huge machine that functions in an inhuman and meaningless way.

*A hundred thousand miles we go
Wheeling and tacking O'er the
Eternal plain
Some black with death and some
Are white with woe
Who sent us forth? Who takes us
Home again?*

Death in his poetry is not regarded as beautiful and heroic, it is terrible and piteous. His sonnet on the 'Dead' expresses the same idea:

*When you see millions of the
Mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale
Battalions go
Say not soft things as other men
Have said,
That you'll remember, for you need nor so,
Give them not praise, for deaf, how
Should they know
It is not curses heaped on each
Gashed head
Nor tears, Their blind eyes see not,*

*Your tears flow
Nor honour, it is easy to be dead*

He considered the war as a tragic cleavage between two great nations blinded by hatred.

Siegfried Sassoon His experience in the war has been expressed in the form of poetry. Firsthand knowledge of the conditions of warfare produced in him a bitter disillusionment and he wanted to make people realize the appalling truth. Sassoon painted the horrors of life and death in the trenches, dugouts and hospitals in his poems in a satirical way. He has written against the stupidity and vulgarity of the people who shut their eyes to the horrors and atrocities associated with war.

Wilfred Owen- He was very much inspired and impressed by Sassoon. Having served as an infantry officer he knew the realities of war. Owen set out to present the whole reality of war, the boredom, the hopelessness, the horror, the futility, occasionally the courage and self sacrifice, but above all the pity of war. He himself wrote "*I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is war and the pity of war, the poetry is in pity*". In his poem 'Strange Meeting' he imagined that in vision or dream he had met the German Soldier he had killed the previous day. The dead man complained about his death as preventing him from telling the world the truth about war. He foresaw the whole nations marching in unbroken ranks away from progress. He had sufficient courage and wisdom to refuse, had he lined to join their march and when they had learnt through bloodshed and falsity of their ideals, he could have brought them the cleansing and healing of the truths revealed to him.

T.S.Eliot: Disillusionment and neurotic boredom in the period after the First World War have been well expressed in his most celebrated work 'The Waste Land'. Most of the critics are of the view that 'The Waste Land' is a plight of a whole generation, an expression of disillusionment of the post war generation, that it expresses better than any other poem of that decade the sense of hopeless draft which afflicted the generation after the First World War, then it is vision of Europe, mainly of London, at the end of the First World War.(I.A.Richards in Principles of Literary Criticism Page 295).

The poem expresses disgust with modern civilization and with Post War Society. Eliot has introduced various parallels with the great literature of the past and places them next to lines describing the barrenness of England. 'The Waste Land' made a tremendous impact on the post war generation. Based on the legend of the Fisher King in the Arthurian Cycle, the poem presents the contemporary London as an arid, Waste Land. The poem is built round the symbols of drought and flood representing death and rebirth. The dead or the dying civilization of England is portrayed in the poem. The people are weary, disillusioned and depressing. They feel that civilization has betrayed them. Their elders had glorified Science and Democracy, Peace and Progress. The war, they were told was fought to end all wars to make the world safe for democracy. But the war was won at the loss of peace. The peace makers have sown the seeds of another war. There is spiritual barrenness everywhere. People want to forget the past and have nothing to look forward to the future. They have no faith, no belief. The Predicament has forced them to have a good time to give themselves up to sensual pleasure. The poem gives poetic expression to the underlying spirit of the 20th Century contrasting its bitterness with richness of life in Classical and Elizabethan time.

In his earlier poems also, this sense of despair could be noticed. Disgust with the age and with life in general which might have resulted an account of war found expression in the poems like 'The Love Song of Alfred J.Prufrock', 'The Hollow Men', 'Gerontion'.

Eliot has also tried to search the remedy for the predicament of the modern age. He found faith in religion and expressed his mystical faith in 'Ash Wednesday', 'Four Quartets'. His poetry represents a kind of gradual evolution, the progress of the soul through the suffering. 'Ash Wednesday' marks the beginning of a new phase in the poet's development, in which he finds hope in the religion. In 'Four Quartets' the intensity of Eliot's search for religious truth which leads finally to a new hope in the idea of rebirth and renewal is very much seen.

Miss Edith Sitwell- Edith Sitwell was deeply conscious of the unhappiness and spiritual emptiness of the inter war years; she sought to escape into the world of childhood and art. With her brothers Osbert and Sacheverell, she edited 'Wheels: an Annual Anthology of Modern Verse'. She had a nostalgic regret for disappearance of the culture and all her writings reflect her aristocratic background. She believed that "Poetry is the deification of reality, and one of its purposes is to show that the dimensions of man are, as Sir Arthur Eddington said, 'half way between those of an atom and a star.'"

W.H.Auden: he was also aware of the hollowness of the disintegrating post-war civilization. He found his solution to the world's problems in left wing political ideologies. ' In September 1939' he surveys the history of Europe, analyzing the causes of the war and asserting what his own attitude to the future will be. He begins by branding the 'Thirties' as a low dishonest decade and says that Germany had adopted Hitler as its 'Psychopathic God'.

" ...What huge image made
A Psychopathic God"

In other poem 'Diaspora' he comments on the Nazi oppression of Jews indirectly. Jews had to scatter over Europe and other parts of the world because of the Nazi oppression. Auden finds 'Objective Co-relative' for the contemporary situation in what happened to Christ 2000 years ago. Ages ago, the Jews had oppressed Christ, in the modern age they have been paid back in their own coin. The Nazis oppressed the Jews. In this Sonnet, Auden has compressed whole ages of history. The past fuses with the present, and the oppressors are transformed into the oppressed. Oppressors like Hitler will one day suffer as the Jews are suffering today for their sins.

In the poem 'Canzone' the poet refers to the evil and wickedness rampant in the world. Dictators like Hitler and Mussolini are making a lot of noise; the cherished values of humanity are being denounced. The masses are absent minded and unreflective that are carried away by the orations of their wicked, selfish rulers and are like 'dump driven cattle' in their hands. They have become tools in the hands of dictators and Auden firmly believes that Man's salvation lies in his learning to love rightly. Thus Auden has written about the post-war situation in his poems.

Stephen Spender- other important poet to be considered in this regard is Stephen Spender. Spender was deeply aware of the suffering and unhappiness of the inter-war period and like Auden expressed his hopes for the future. The majority of his poems are short lyrics and he has written mostly about the pity of war and the emotions of the lovers. His interest in contemporary history- chiefly the Spanish Civil War and World War II have been reflected in his poems. His 'Two Armies' which describes enemy forces resting at night only a few yards apart describes the pity of the war.

When the machines are stilled,
A common suffering
Whitens the air with breath and
Makes both one
As though these enemies slept in
Each other's arms.

Thus English Poets have reflected the horrors of war and the frustration caused by the war in their poetry. The poets who were deeply influenced by the disastrous events did not become pessimists; on the contrary, they have faced the events boldly and bravely. They have also tried to find out the remedy for the existing problems. Sense of turmoil in the widest possible varieties of expression has been sounded by the poets. They have expressed directly or in parable their present dilemmas and plight of mankind- distrust of the past, despair of the present and fear for the future.

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